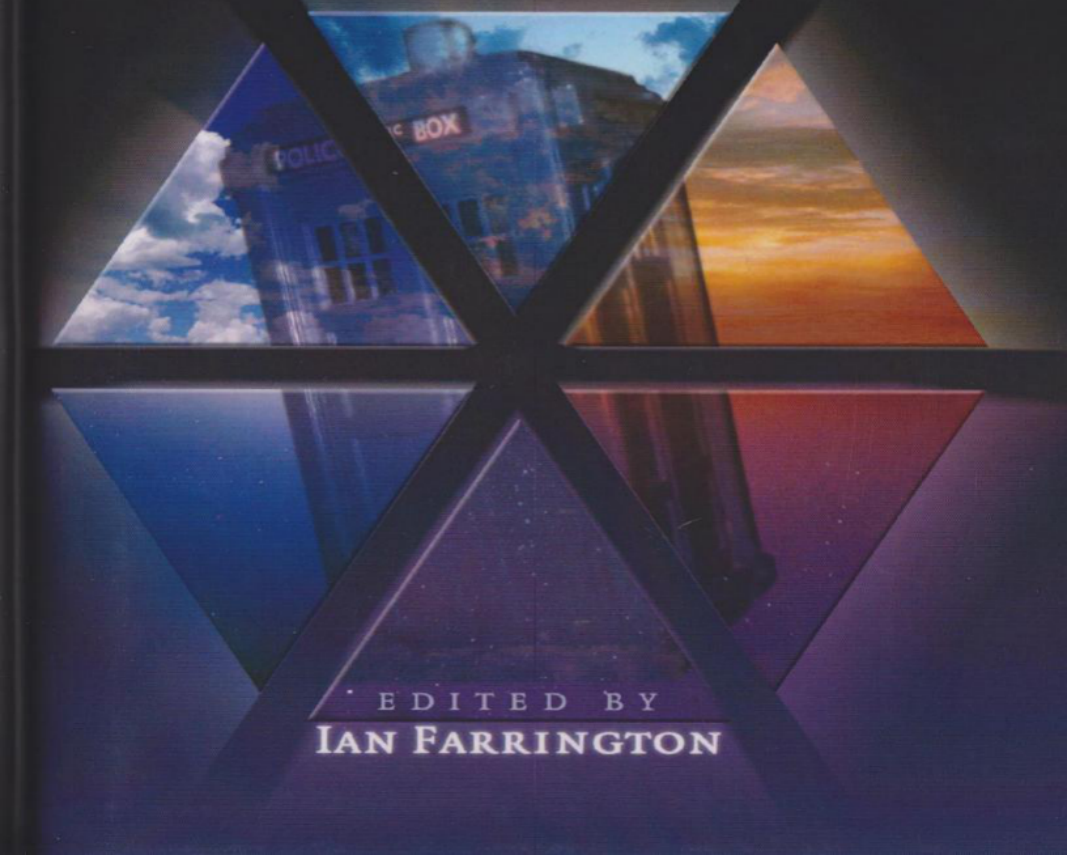
BIG FINISH

DOCTOR WHO

SHORT TRIPS: A DAY IN THE LIFE

A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY



EDITED BY

IAN FARRINGTON

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SEVENTEEN BRAND NEW ADVENTURES IN TIME AND SPACE!

SHORT TRIPS: A DAY IN THE LIFE

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When you're time travellers, the concept of a day – from midnight to midnight – can get lost: the Doctor and his companions arrive on different planets in different eras at different times of the day. They can show up during someone's lunch break or when they're asleep, at the breaking of dawn or the coming of night.

Throughout his adventures, the Doctor meets many people – security guards on a night shift, mysterious space travellers riding the vortex, mobs of blobby Kobolds, a family sitting down to watch TV – but all too often their interaction is brief, a fleeting connection in the web of history.

Time, it seems, is very much of the essence...

Featuring stories by Dan Abnett, Trevor Baxendale, Nev Fountain, Simon Guerrier, Joseph Lidster and many more!

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00.00

After Midnight

Andy Russell

I **am** experiencing the most *peculiar of dreams where everything makes perfect sense. I am aware* **that** this phenomenon is far from uncommon, *that the most outlandish of imaginings can* **appear** *logical* within *the* context of the subconscious mind, but this is different. Not only does **everything** *make sense* but I now know things *of* which I *was previously ignorant and had no* **means of learning.**

My dream *began* with me inside *a vast amorphous* bubble that *seemed* to *hold* this universe **within.** *Before being granted* breathing *space in* which to reflect upon *the* implausibility of this state *of affairs, I was* hurled outward, *gathering* velocity, hurtling through *space* and time.

And as !flew, *I viewed a kaleidoscope* of disparate lives from myriad perspectives.

Now I *have reached a* still point, looking *down upon* a blue *and green world* from upon **high. I** *remember that I* **harbour** *a deeply abiding fear of great* altitude so *the sudden dive as I* **leave my** *former* lift *far behind* alarms me *to* say *the least.*

I have *no idea how I know,* but I *grasp the* fact that the planet I am plunging towards is **called** *the Earth. My stomach-churning* course takes me toward the northern hemisphere and **a small landmass to** *the* north of Europe. The *United Kingdom. I* plummet down, *my terrified point of view telescoping in: England, the county of Somerset, a city called* Bath, the offices of **MacDonald,** *O'Brien and* Withers (Solicitors). *I screw my eyes* shut *as I* hit the building...

Dave woke with a jolt, a sense of falling from a great height inexplicably on his mind.

pocket

His heart pounding and his breath ragged in his chest, he

rummaged in his

from

for his grubby handkerchief and mopped at his brow. Wiping the sweat

his bleary eyes, Dave became aware of two faces in close proximity to his

awn. Both faces, split by wide grins, bobbed up and down slightly as their owners tried not to laugh.

'Totally incredible, Dave,' said the first face, giggling. It was thin, blotched with misty red spots and framed by lank, greasy hair. The small eyes and bad breath

combined to trigger Dave's memory and supply the man's identity: Gavin.

'How d'you do it, matey?' asked the second man, in a rich Irish brogue. Dave

remembered this to be Eddie, overweight with a ruddy complexion and closely

cropped ginger hair.

'Do what? asked Dave, giving himself time to glance around and get his

bearings. Then it all came back to him: he was in the tiny security control room in the office block that housed MacDonald, O'Brien and Withers (Solicitors). His

apes swept the room. The walls were cold and grey. A bank of monitor screens

&splayed the empty corridors and offices of the building and the deserted car park outside.

'Dave, me old pal,' said Gavin in his customary nasal whine, 'it don't matter

where you are, you can always sleep soundly on the job.'

`Yeah,' confirmed Eddie, tut you always manage to wake up every hour, on the

hour.'

Dave glanced blearily at the clock on the wall. It was just a few seconds past

midnight.

`We was keeping an eye on the time,' said Gavin. 'You woke up bang on the

stroke of midnight. How d'you do it?'

Dave hoisted himself upright in his seat, trying to smooth the crumpled cotton

of his shirt. 'I don't know,' he stammered, his brow furrowed in consternation.

`There was something I had to do. Something really important...'

`Too right there is, my old son,' sneered Gavin. 'It's time you two were off on

your rounds.'

Eddie groaned. 'What's the point? Nothing ever happens anyways.'

`The point,' insisted Gavin, leaning back on the security console and folding his

arms emphatically, 'is I'm the team leader and I says we plays it by the book. One

patrol every hour is what it says and one patrol every hour is what we do.'

`What *we* do, you mean,' Eddie corrected him bitterly as he straightened his grey uniform and pulled on his peaked cap. 'Come on, Davey-boy. Best *keep* the boss happy.'

Leaping awkwardly to his feet and pulling his uniform jumper hurriedly over his

head, Dave yelled as his thigh collided painfully with the corner of the

console. He grabbed his own cap and made to follow Eddie out of the room.

'OW shouted Gavin. Dave turned just in time to catch the small black box Gavin

had tossed over to him. 'Don't forget your comm. Remember it pays to keep in

touch.'

Down in the basement an industrial lamp, all chunky plastic cover and metal

fitting, flickered, barely illuminating the bunker-like concrete space. The steady

drip-drop of leaking heating pipes as they patiently eroded the piles of carelessly archived documents was disturbed by a reverberating, clanging scrape. A heavy,

metal manhole cover was heaved aside.

A man, just over six feet tall, his well-muscled body clearly defined beneath his

skintight black suit, hauled himself into view. His head was encased in a ski mask

that concealed most of his features — a pair of bloodshot eyes glared from twin

eyeholes. Standing at the edge of the manhole, breathing deeply like a dog

catching a scent, the man removed a torch from his belt and looked at a floor plan

he'd unfolded.

`Room 413,' he hissed in a manner that suggested he already knew where he as

going. 'Fourth floor.'

Folding the map away, the figure stalked through the door that led to the rest of

the building.

`This is a total waste of time and effort.'

Dave suppressed a sigh. As usual, Eddie was moaning about their regular

patrols around the corridors of the building. He'd started as soon as they left the security room and walked through reception to the lift, and he hadn't stopped for

breath since. Trailing in his friend's wake, Dave shook his head. If only he could

remember what it was he needed to do.

`Nothin' ever happens,' said Eddie. 'Half the time we sit around doin' nothin'.

The other half we walk around doin' nothin'. Our lives are a mundane drudge **ruled** by the monotony of senseless routine.'

'We talk a lot,' said Dave. 'Well, some of us do anyway,' he added under his

breath.

'Oh, sure,' replied Eddie, obviously unwilling to be consoled in any way. 'Boring

conversations about sport or politics or women.'

Dave's hand flew to his right ear, his face creasing in agony, as Gavin's voice

blared through his earpiece. He frantically twisted the volume control on the black **box** hooked into his belt.

'There is nothing boring about women,' observed Gavin.

Pulling the tiny speaker from his ear, Dave stuck his finger in and wiggled it in

an attempt to stop the ringing. Wincing, he looked up expecting to see Eddie cracking up at his discomfort. Eddie was standing stock-still, a

vacant look on his Slack-jawed face.

'Eddie? Ed, are you okay, mate?' Dave waved a hand in front of Eddie's face but

his colleague remained blank, eyes staring sightlessly into the middle distance.

'D'you know what?' said Eddie, suddenly blinking rapidly.

Dave heaved a sigh of relief. 'Eddie, I thought we'd lost you for a minute. Here.'

He produced a hip flask from his pocket, unscrewed the top and offered it to Bddie. 'Have a slug of Scotch.'

'I feel like a woman,' he said matter-of-factly, 'trapped in a man's body.'

Dave lifted the flask to his lips, threw back his head and glugged down a

mouthful of its contents.

In the security control room, Gavin stared at the CCTV monitor that showed an **Image of** Dave and Eddie. He tapped his earpiece with a hesitant finger in the hope **that he** had misheard. Dave's reaction, however, seemed to prove otherwise.

Gavin moved his face closer to the screen, and zoomed the camera in. He

immunised the screen: from his balding red head, down past the expensively

cultivated beer belly to the short, slightly bowed legs, it was definitely Eddie **Callaghan**

Which made his simple statement all the more incredible.

A small red light began to flash on the control console and, relieved to have **something** to concentrate on, Gavin began pressing buttons, bringing up the

output of the building's numerous CCTV cameras onto the bank of monitors

before him. There it was. Gavin zoomed in on a patch of shadow in one of the **corridors** on the fourth floor. A man, clad from head to toe in black, stalked **through the** darkness.

I remember ***seeing similar figures a long time ago in*** my past — ***when*** I ***was an old man.***

'Owe was a word for them but I can't quite bring it to mind.

Gavin shook his head. Why was his vision suddenly so blurred? Focusing on the 5

monitor, Gavin pulled the microphone towards his lips, never once allowing his

eyes to wander from the image of the figure moving through the gloom.

`Right, stop clowning around, you two.' Gavin spoke clearly, dropping into

what he considered to be the efficient tone of a security team leader. 'We have an

intruder on the fourth floor. Look smart, gentlemen. Get up there and find him.'

Eddie watched as Dave jogged on ahead towards the lift. His colleague had put

away the hip flask — he shouldn't have booze with him on the job; if the company

found out, they'd have no qualms about giving Dave the sack. Then who would

Eddie have to talk to on these little expeditions? Some kid, working nights to earn a bit of cash before going off to university, who knew all about Einstein but had

never heard of *Noggin the Nog* . They'd have nothing in common. And what about Gavin? He was no good at conversation and not as funny as he thought he was.

And another thing, I am *rather* annoyed by Gavin's frankly chauvinistic attitude to *women.* It was bad enough in 1930 but I *should have* thought things *would be* different in *the* twenty-first century.

The intruder was approaching the door to room 413. He moved stealthily, each

step filled with purpose as he got closer to his goal.

His mind burned brightly with the vision of a small artefact to which his fate

was inextricably bound. It drew him onward, calling him, beckoning him. It was

a summons the intruder could not resist even had he wanted to.

The door to room 413 was, like most of the others in the building, of plain dark

wood with a narrow window positioned above the handle. The intruder peered

into the room and saw, with some satisfaction, a row of large safes ranged along

the far wall. These would, for the most part, contain sensitive client

documentation and valuable items entrusted to the safekeeping of the solicitors.

One of them, however, contained something of immeasurably greater worth to

the intruder.

Next to the door handle was a security keypad. The intruder closed his eyes,

allowing his forefinger to stab at the keys. As the last key in a seven-digit sequence was hit, the door clicked open and the intruder stepped inside.

Moving swiftly to the third safe from the left, he placed one gloved hand on the

grey metal of the door. Eyes closed once more, his other hand manipulated the

combination dial. A few deft movements whirled the dial back and forth until,

with a solid clunk, the safe was unlocked. Hauling the door open, the intruder

looked inside, eyes widening greedily at the sight that met him.

On a shelf in the middle of the safe, on top of a small pile of manila folders, was the artefact. It was an amulet in the shape of a golden disc, roughly four inches in diameter. At its centre sat a large, bright green stone of absolute perfection,

delicate filigree lines radiating out. The whole thing glowed with an unearthly

inner power. It burned even brighter as the intruder reached out and took hold

of it

The instant he touched the amulet he felt a wave of energy pass through his

body. His mind reeled as perception shifted about him. It was as if a blindfold had 6

fallen from his eyes and he was seeing clearly for the first time. He could sense the **future as vividly** as he could see his present surroundings. He knew with sudden **certainty that two security guards would enter the corridor outside this room in exactly three minutes and two seconds. The third guard was in their control room, about to observe this room using the ceiling-mounted CCTV camera.**

The intruder slipped the chain around his neck, allowing the amulet to settle

warmly on his chest. Then he looked straight at the camera, smiled a concealed

smile and gave a cheerful wave.

Gavin found the correct button at last and managed to access the image from the

CCTV camera in the secure room. As the picture resolved itself on one of the

monitors, Gavin found himself staring into the piercingly clear

eyes of the intruder.

He physically recoiled from the image, taking a step back from the monitor,

beads of cold sweat breaking out across his forehead. The screen showed a man

but Gavin knew beyond all doubt that the creature standing in the middle of room 413 was anything but human. There was nothing Gavin could attach the feeling

to, he couldn't even begin to grasp where it came from, but there on the screen

***lurked* something inhuman,** alien.

Averting his eyes from the monitor, Gavin grabbed the microphone. 'Eddie,

Dave, this is Gavin. Listen up, troops. You need to be very careful. I think our Intruder is dangerous. I say again, proceed with extreme caution.'

Gavin suddenly realised he was shaking. He sank into his seat and nibbled at

OW of his nails.

Who's he think he is?' muttered Eddie. 'Inspector Morse?'

'He sounded rattled to me,' said Dave, sounding nervous himself. 'Scared half

In death,' he added, before taking a gulp from his hip flask.

'Calm down, Davey.' Eddie laid a reassuring hand on Dave's shoulder. 'Look

at the size of us? More than capable of dealing with one little burglar, the two of u, eh?'

Even if one* of** us **is a *mere girl!

'Did I just say that out loud?' said Eddie.

'Say what out loud?' asked a bemused Dave.

'Never mind. Point is, we can take care of ourselves, yeah?'

'I'm not so certain that we can, Charlotte. You forget, my training was as a Nook. I am a man of peace at heart.'

violence

'Can't say I've ever noticed you havin' any sort of a problem with physical

after fifteen pints down the pub on a Saturday night,' said Eddie. 'Tell you

What, you stay here an' make sure he don't get out this way. I'll go an' get 'im on Ma own.'

Dave nodded eagerly, downed the last dregs of his hip flask, then screwed the

imp *back* on and slipped it into his right-hand trouser pocket

,t addle made for room 413, but just before he turned the corner at the end of the passageway

, he glanced back to see Dave shrug and withdraw a second flask from

his left-hand trouser pocket. He was unscrewing the top as Eddie lost sight of

him.

Èddie? Can you hear me?' Gavin's worried tones sounded in Eddie's ear. The

intruder's gone. Vanished from the cameras. The camera that should be covering

the corridor you're in is out of action. I don't have a visual on you. Can you hear me, Eddie?'

Eddie smiled to himself, deciding to keep quiet just to irritate the hell out of Gavin. The lights as well as the camera seemed to be out in this corridor, leaving it in darkness. Damned intruder could be anywhere and Eddie wouldn't stand a

snowball's chance of seeing him. He screwed up his eyes in a vain attempt to

penetrate the gloom and wondered who Charlotte was.

Charlotte is who I am! Charley Pollard. I may be trapped inside this *somewhat*

***unwholesome* — if you'll pardon *my saying so — body,* but I *can't believe I've* actually forgotten**

who* I am. And I volunteered! Now, why *was that,* I *wonder? One of the Doctor's schemes, of

course.* I recall him *telling* us, *C'rizz* and me, that *we'd need* to *concentrate* our minds, focus *on

***the* plan. The trouble is, I can't for the lift *of me remember what* the plan was.**

What *was* that? A *noise,* behind *and above me. I whirl around, not easy getting this*

awkward* body to *move* quickly, *and see* the *intruder as he* drops from a hole in *the ceiling.

I have no time to react when he raises a hand* to my *face.* He's holding a small canister with a button on the top. He *presses* the button, a fine spray is hitting my *face.* It's *in my* nose and mouth. I'm *coughing.

***The darkness deepens* all around me.**

His heart racing, Gavin desperately tried to re-establish contact with his two

colleagues. There was no sight or sound from Eddie and the camera trained on

Dave showed him standing unsteadily, a look of befuddled gormlessness on his

face. As Gavin watched, the ever-present hip flaskwas lifted to Dave's lips yet again.

`Dave!' he yelled over the comms system. Tor God's sake, get out of there.

Move! We've lost Eddie. I don't know what to do. Help! Someone help me!'

No! I must not, will not *panic. We've gone too deep and lost sight of* our own personalities.

The plan is in danger of failing.

Who am I?

I am not a security guard. I am *an adventurer. I* travel through time and space. I fight the

***monsters.* And I win.**

I am the Doctor!

Suddenly calm, Gavin turned back to the control console, gripping the

microphone with renewed determination. Watching Dave on the monitor with

steady, unblinking eyes, he spoke calmly and with a new note of authority.

`C'rizz, listen to me,' he said. 'This is the Doctor. Remember who you are. You

are C'rizz. You must wake up and focus on the plan.'

Dave stood in the corridor, swaying slightly from side to side. The whisky had

dulled his senses, leaving his vision blurred and his hearing muffled. He could

hear Gavin yelling in his ear telling him that Eddie was gone and that he should run but he was having trouble getting his legs to agree to the effort.

8

Then he discerned a change in Gavin's voice and found himself being addressed

as someone called 'Chris' or something and he decided that his team

leader had

finally lost it. **Draining the flask of the last of its contents,** Dave turned and **Mumbled back along the corridor, falling into** the door of the men's **toilet, allowing his weight to push it open.**

As Dave staggered towards the urinals, he noticed one of the polystyrene tiles

from the suspended ceiling lying discarded in the corner.

'S'funny,' he slurred. 'Don't remember anything 'bout maintenance being done

tonight.'

With a shrug, Dave turned back to the job in hand and found himself face to

mask with the intruder. He forgot to breathe. The cold green eyes of the intruder seemed somehow inhuman as they bored into his own. Dave found himself

{voicing away only for his eyes to be drawn to the glowing amulet on the intruder's chest.

'You admire the navigator, human?' rasped the intruder. Dave nodded slowly,

linable to drag his gaze away.

navigate 'Allow me to explain its function. It is a piece of technology that allows me to a course through time and space. Within the next twenty of your minutes,

She navigator will have realigned itself to my biorhythms and I shall be able to go anywhere, and any time I choose.'

Dave regarded the amulet dumbly. None of this made any sense. Alien burglars

Gavelling through time to steal a necklace.

'A side effect of the navigator's function is that it allows its operator to predict figure events,' continued the intruder. 'It reviews the present and, in complex and

■ fathomable ways, extrapolates future events. A simple example is that of a

human guard who drinks too much. It is inevitable that he will *end* up here. Of

=wee, one hardly needs the navigator to predict that.'

The space-time navigation unit. Of course, I remember now. The Doctor *said* it *was vital* to Make sure that it *was* safe.

Now **that I** have remembered that I am C'rizz inside the body ***of*** this human guard, I look **main upon this intruder and** *see* him for who he is. Beneath the human body ***he*** **is wearing, I am Just discern another form.** ***The*** **true** ***visage*** **of the** ***creature*** **that calls itself Darrakhaan. I** ***see***

MI shadowy ***face, needle-sharp teeth crowding its wide*** **mouth, sharp** ***spines rising from*** **the** ***top***

II*

beautiful

head **and cascading** ***down its hunched back. Those eyes, cold*** **and ruthless,** ***at once***

and **terrible,** ***staring*** **lidless into my very soul.**

my Oh, ***dear.*** In regaining my own personality I appear to have lost control of ***the*** **functions of host body.** Warm liquid courses down his ***leg,*** **staining his trousers.**

Durakhaan watched the human's nose as it wrinkled slightly and noticed as its

eyes glanced

down from the navigation unit. He followed the line of the human's

t and saw the dark wet patch spreading across the man's trousers.

'Pathetic human.' Darrakhaan raised the canister of nerve gas, and discharged

into

the guard's face. The human's body dropped to the floor like a puppet

***lose strings had been cut. Without a backward glance, Darrakhaan strode out of**

is room.

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As he made his way towards the basement, he allowed himself a moment of

self-congratulatory reflection. The raid had been a complete success in which he

took considerable professional pride. The space-time navigation unit had been

restored to its proper owner and he would be careful never to lose it again. In a few short minutes the unit would be calibrated to his body and mind, and they would

remain joined for all eternity, able to go anywhere in creation.

The amulet had helped him intercept two of the guards and put them out of

action. It predicted that the third would be too terrified to do anything other than remain in his control room and call the local police. Darrakhaan would be long

gone before they arrived.

He passed through the door that led to the basement. What awaited him there

brought him up short in astonished disbelief: in the dim light of the basement,

the third security guard stood nonchalantly beside Darrakhaan's escape route, the

manhole that led to the tunnels.

There was something wrong here. How could the navigation unit have been

mistaken about where the third guard would be? Was it malfunctioning? If so, he

would be trapped here on this miserable planet and, worse, within this pathetic

body for the rest of its natural life.

Then there was the guard. He was an especially feeble specimen, his body thin

and ungainly, his ratlike face covered with some kind of dermatological infection,

his greasy hair clinging to his head. Yet, despite all this, his bearing was one of studied poise, that of a confidant, self-assured man.

`Hello, Darrakhaan,' said the guard, and his voice was quite different from that

which Darrakhaan would have expected. Strong and clear, it spoke with the quiet

authority of one used to speaking without any doubt that his words would be

listened to.

`How can you, a mere human, know my name?' hissed Darrakhaan.

`Well, perhaps because I am not a "mere human" as you so indelicately put it,'

said the man, smiling. 'Look closer and you might see the man behind the mask.'

Darrakhaan took a step towards him, widening his eyes and deliberately

dilating his pupils to make the best use of the limited light available. He

concentrated, peering through the face of the guard, trying to catch a glimpse of

the real inhabitant of this body. A vague impression swam before Darrakhaan's

gaze: a noble face framed by long, chestnut curls, penetrating blue eyes either side of a long, straight nose, full lips parted in an easy smile.

`Doctor.'

`Got it in one,' said the Doctor. 'Choose any prize from the top shelf.'

`How...?'

`How did I manage to predict that you would be here now? Darrakhaan, have

you forgotten that I was in contact with the navigation unit too? I already knew

that you would inhabit the physical form of a petty burglar at this point in time and space. I arranged for the unit to be here so that you would attempt to steal it. It was a simple matter to arrange for myself and my friends to arrive in the bodies of the three security guards.'

`Why go to such lengths, Doctor?' spat Darrakhaan angrily.

'Because,' said the Doctor simply, 'I knew you had almost completely bonded

with the space-time navigator and I understood the havoc you would cause to the **web** of time if I allowed you to wander hither and thither with your species's usual **lack of** due care and attention. I knew I had to capture both you and the navigator **and** this was the easiest way to do it.'

Darrakhaan seethed with anger. He heard movement behind him and turned to

ace the other two security guards at the top of the steps. Both looked the worse for **wear** after their recent encounters with the nerve gas, pain written on their faces **and** hands clutched to their heads.

Àh, there you are, you two,' called the Doctor. 'Come on in and join the party.

Darrakhaan, I' m sure you remember my friends, Charley and C'rizz.'

'This is not possible,' said Darrakhaan. 'The nerve gas should have left

them

sleeping for hours.'

'**All** credit to Charley and C'rizz,' said the Doctor. 'Actually, the host bodies are **technically** still unconscious. My friends, however, are very obviously not.'

'Doctor,' said Charley's voice, issuing incongruously from the thin lips of Eddie

Cellaghan. 'What's been happening?'

'**Yes,**' said C'rizz. 'I can't remember what we are supposed to be doing here.'

'**The** plan worked, then,' said the Doctor, beaming. 'You see, we had to

Completely submerge our own personalities, otherwise Darrakhaan here would

have been able to anticipate our responses. Incidentally,' he continued, seeming **$o anticipate** Darrakhaan's half-formed plan to leap towards the manhole, 'there's **Do point** trying to reach the kayak you had moored in the river at the other end of **the tunnel.** The navigator predicted it would be there. I let it drift away hours ago.'

Darrakhaan laughed a deep, throaty roar of amusement. 'All that time and effort

to arrange such an elaborate plot, Doctor,' he said, 'and the stratagem has failed.

You see, the navigator is now realigned and calibrated. I can leave. Goodbye,

Doctor.'

surrounded Darrakhaan touched the jewel at the centre of the amulet and a green glow

him. He knew that when the glow faded, both he and the amulet

would be gone.

Well done, you two,' said the Doctor as he and C'rizz carried the intruder, who'd **Crumpled** soundlessly to the floor when Darrakhaan

had activated the amulet, into **the office** reception area and placed him beside the door.

'**But** surely we failed,' said Charley, confused.

'**Whatever makes you** think that?' replied the Doctor, straightening his uniform.

'Darrakhaan escaped,' pointed out C'rizz. 'Didn't he?'

'**Yes and** no,' said the Doctor.

'What do you mean, Doctor?' asked Charley, placing Eddie's hands on his hips

is a manner that would surely have had the Irishman turning scarlet if anyone

*__Mid see__ him.

'**1 admit** it was touch and go for a while there,' the Doctor said, grinning, 'but

***ow* trap** has been sprung.'

'**I don't** understand,' said C'rizz.

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`Darrakhaan thinks he's got away,' explained the Doctor. 'In fact, he's off on a

round trip. He doesn't realise it yet but he's caught in a time loop. Imprisoned for all eternity. A fitting fate for a thief of time, don't you think?'

`Well, if that takes care of everything, can we please go?' asked Charley. 'I'm fed up with being an Edwardian adventuress trapped in the body of a twenty-first-century Irish thug.'

Ànd I have a headache. I've never drunk so much before,' complained C'rizz.

`Not to mention the fact that wet trousers are very uncomfortable.'

Now, now,' admonished the Doctor as he produced a golden amulet from

inside Gavin's jacket. 'We mustn't be rude to our hosts. The police will arrive

shortly so I think we can leave them to do the clearing up. We've got things to do.

The most dangerous part of the plan is yet to be played out.'

With that, he touched the green stone at the centre of the amulet and a strange

light surrounded the three guards.

The initial police report from the officers on the scene, timed at 1.38am, noted that the guards responsible for night security at the offices of MacDonald, O'Brien and

Withers (Solicitors) were unable to remember the events of the previous two

hours. The team leader, Gavin Jones, was babbling incessantly about aliens;

Edward Callaghan, who kept repeating that `Nothin' ever happens', was suffering

from the effects of an experimental nerve gas, as too was David Lampton, who was

breathalysed and found to be also under the influence of alcohol.

Despite being arrested on the premises, Anthony James Dunn, a professional

burglar well known to the police, denied breaking into the office block. He was

unable to account for his actions.

12

01.38

Sold Out

Danny Oz

'**Ladies** and gentlemen, Diamond has now entered REM sleep! In another few

moments, our wonderful technicians will have set things in motion to maintain **that** state and you will be able to take your places.'

Mel looked at her watch. 'At last,' she said, sighing. The Doctor looked at her

and *gave* a sigh himself, though it was far more theatrical and pointed.

'Really, Mel, you can't hurry an artist.'

'Doctor, he's only a rock and roll star.'

'Only? What do you mean, only? That's like saying Michelangelo was a guy who

sketched a bit. Diamond Sharp is the Hieronymus Bosch of rock opera. He looks **IMO** the dark depths of the human soul and shows us the wonders and horrors that

&ell within.' The Doctor finished his mercifully short speech and looked at Mel, **obviously** waiting for her to beg forgiveness for making such a terrible error.

Mel wasn't going to give her friend an inch. 'Well, I'd have expected more

people for a one-time-only comeback concert then. Though only hardcore fanatics would stay up this late to hear some clapped-out old rocker.'

The Doctor seemed to swell with indignation but, before he could utter another WOW, Diamond's manager, Rolly, made a second announcement. It was time to

Omer the auditorium.

The doors opened and the small crowd started to file in. The Doctor looked at **Mel and**

ìm

asked her once more if she wouldn't change her mind. 'Honestly, Doctor,

more interested in the technology than the music. You tell me all about it when **goo come** back **out:**

undoubtedly The Doctor smiled. 'Well, I hope you find your side of things as rewarding as I'll

find mine. See you in a couple of hours, Mel.' And with that, he

'Dined the line and started talking to three teenagers dressed in black. As they

Coached the doors, he lifted a high-tech headband and pulled it over his curly

Ed locks. Mel shook her head in wonder. A future where virtually everyone had ability to directly connect to the computer system. It boggled the mind.

final **It wouldn't** have occurred to her that you'd need to wait until after someone's **headbands**

growth spurt before they could have a skull implant. Thank heavens they had

for the young, otherwise it would have been a wasted trip for both her

Nod

though

the Doctor. The teens were laughing and joking with him as they walked

the doorway. They were amused an 'oldie' needed a headband.

Mel smiled. The Doctor really could talk to anybody.

auditorium **the** wandered over to Rolly, who was watching the people entering the

. The last man in turned and gave Rolly a friendly wave. The short, fat

Imager

rem**ember**

cheerfully called after him. 'I hope *we* can give you a concert to

, Mr Pen!' The man disappeared from view and Rolly whispered to Mel,

Moody critics. Can't live with 'em, can't shoot 'em.'

15

Diamond's manager led her through the 'Staff Only' door and into the main

studio. Within the studio was a range of complex computer systems, a main

console and eight stations that looked like comfortable, high-tech dentist's

chairs. A man in his late sixties, Diamond Sharp, occupied one of the chairs and

seemed fast asleep. He was dressed head to toe in studded black leather. From the

skulljack hidden in his long grey hair, a thin hardline connector snaked to a nearby computer deck. The deck was jet black and had his logo stencilled on the side. Two

technicians who Mel had met earlier, Carol and Alec, were jacked in to a nearby

computer station using wireless connectors.

`Thanks again for this, Rolly, it's very nice of you,' said Mel.

`Rubbish! The techs love the chance to show off and the Doctor is an old friend.'

Roily wandered over to the chair next to Diamond and sat down. He pulled a green

wireless plug from the headrest. Alec raced over and took the softline connector

from him.

`You don't want that one, Chief,' he said, nodding towards the black computer

deck. Rolly went pale and thanked him as the younger man selected a different

coloured jack and gently plugged the manager in. Roily went limp in the chair.

Mel, who had been watching things with interest, wandered over. 'Is there a

problem?'

`Nah,' said Alec. 'Everything's top spec.'

`Then why couldn't Rolly plug in using the first connector?'

`That one is a direct link to the deck and no one gets plugged into that except

Diamond himself. Now if you come over here, I'll show you the set-up that allows

the dream concert to work.' He paused and looked at Mel. 'Is it true that you don't have a skulljack?' Mel told him it was and he shook his head in disbelief. Wow, a

real Luddite. Doesn't matter, we have plenty of headbands. Come on, they're

getting started.'

As they walked over to the main consoles, Mel glanced out through the window

at the auditorium. Her friend was easy to spot in his garish coat. She watched as

an attendant adjusted the thin flexible band on the Doctor's head and plugged him

in using a hardline connector.

`Have fun, Doctor,' she said quietly to the now limp figure.

The seats were living and covered in fur. As each audience member appeared

within the dream environment and took their seat it would change

colour to

mimic their clothing. The Doctor's chair shifted colours several times in rapid

succession before giving up and returning to a simple green-grey, much to Rolly's

apparent amusement.

The Doctor nodded appreciatively, commenting on imagery from five different

album covers in the area immediately outside the enormous amphitheatre.

Classical renaissance statues framed cities made of bone and forests made of

glass. Behind the stage a sea of rubble with waves of debris crashed onto the

shore. The sky was filled with millions of stars.

`Yep. Goodness knows how long it took Diamond to put these together,' said

Rolly. A voice piped up from behind him

'Well, I hope Diamond has something new to show us, Rolly. I'd hate to have

actually paid for a concert only to have the artist show me a load of his old album Covers.'

'Don't worry, Mr Pen,' said Rolly, his voice holding a slight tinge of bitterness.

'This will certainly be a concert to remember.'

As if on cue, the world began to shake, causing the seats to start moving

nervously about The sky above them broke open and a stage came crashing down

In front of the audience — a shockwave of debris and broken stars rolled towards

and over them.

As the stardust settled, two groups of skeletons ran out onto the stage, one

stoup white, the other black, all carrying musical instruments. They began to play, **ling** the instruments as weapons, using the music itself as ammunition. White **skeletons** ducked and weaved, some of them unable to avoid the backbeat as it tore

***rough** them. A well aimed chord decapitated a black skeleton. The stars started to wink out behind them, slowly at first, but faster and faster as more and more of **the** skeletons fought and died in the symphony of destruction. Finally there were **bur** black skeletons left and a lone white, armed only with an acoustic guitar, **Minding** in the middle of the stage. It fell to its knees, begging, but there was no **mercy.** Aiming their instruments, the four black skeletons played a final climactic **toed**

'extinguished

and the lone bone man was engulfed in flame as the last of the stars were

.

The opening of Fall and Rise of the One-Legged Man', said the Doctor, his voice soft **With appreciation.**

The pillar of flame grew and grew in the centre of the stage. The remaining **skektons** stepped back as the flames suddenly died and there stood Diamond

;harp,

favourite

twenty feet tall, young again with shoulder-length black hair, holding his

electric guitar. He gently played a few notes, hit his opening power

Iliad, and the universe exploded around him.

And the audience cheered.

Met was plugged in and watching as Carol and Alec manipulated the information **mound them. Their** connections didn't allow them to see the concert, it seemed, **slily the** raw **data** and feedback from the audience, superimposed around them.

'**The** dream concert comes from Diamond's own dreams, have I got that right?'

`65 Mel

configurations

watched, Carol seemed almost to knit the bands of coloured light into new

.

Alec answered for his co-worker. 'Yes, but they're shunted through a computer lick **so** it's safer. The audience effectively become a part of his dream, so you want

•table environment, otherwise anything could happen. Dream sharing is a tricky

***eV**

Suddenly there was a massive spike and a portion of the data the older woman he just started OS working with went electric blue. Carol smiled and looked over at Mel. 'I think on Fall and Rise. That'd explain the increased adrenalin in the

Mel shook her head in amazement. 'You really can understand this, can't you?'

17

The older woman nodded gently. 'Our job is pretty simple really. We just make

sure that the audience responses are fed back into Diamond's personal deck so

that he knows how he's going and isn't playing in a vacuum. You could get an AI

to do it but it takes intelligence and creativity to play with the binary throughput in this way.'

`You spend a week with two top deck jockeys like Cazza and myself and we'll

soon have you reading the lines like a pro,' chimed in Alec.

Àlec,' said Carol firmly. 'Please don't call me "Cazza".'

Alec smiled and pressed a few controls. A semi-transparent, multicoloured cube

appeared in front of him. He motioned for Mel to come over and indicated various

lines, contours and colours within the cube as he explained that it was an audience member's life-sign indicator. He asked if Mel would like to see the Doctor's and

she nodded.

The cube appeared and both Alec and Carol gaped at it open-mouthed.

`Don't worry,' said Mel. 'The Doctor has that effect on everyone.'

Diamond Sharp was a giant, striding around full of life and energy. Lightning

crackled at his fingertips as he played, the air shook with his voice. He had just

finished Ballad *for* the Lost when there was a deep rumbling from below.

Suddenly a massive pink snake smashed up through the stage from directly

below Diamond. In a fluid movement its jaws snapped shut on the lower half of

his body, biting him in two. It swallowed the singer's lower body in a gulp. The top half fell away with a ragged scream that was then cut off as the snake swung about

in a blur and swallowed that as well. The great reptile then turned to look at the

audience threateningly through its single great eye.

`You will all die here,' it rasped, then disappeared back the way it had come.

The audience cheered and applauded.

The Doctor, clapping wildly, glanced over at his friend sitting beside him. Roily

wasn't clapping. He was pale, shaking. He slowly got to his feet and the Doctor

asked him what was wrong.

Th... That wasn't part of the show.' The smaller man headed for the stage and

the Doctor raced after him.

`Roily, are you sure?'

`Diamond doesn't play with a successful format, Doctor.' The pair climbed up

on the stage. 'After this he was going to battle the Rust Reaper from the cover of

The Unstoppable Mr Ellingsen, and then launch into a condensed version of its rock

opera. Diamond sticks to his sets and never changes them. Ever.' He paused to

look at the holes smashed in the stage. They were bleeding. 'This was not

planned.'

The Doctor examined the thick liquid.

`Definitely blood, or at least the dream approximation of it.' He looked over at

one of the black skeletons, standing nearer than the others, and held up his blood-

smeared hand. 'Do you know anything about this?' The figure shook its skull and

took a step back nervously.

`Why are you asking that? It's just a prop.'

18

The Doctor shook his head. `No, I noticed when it was playing —'

A statue of the Venus *de* Milo exploded, cutting the Doctor short. A tall, thin robot unfolded itself from the dust and rubble. All curved flowing lines, its silver surface was marred by streaks of rust. In place of a left hand was a long, curved blade.

'The Rust Reaper,' said the Doctor, quietly. Then realisation dawned as it started

***tough the seats towards the stage. 'Everybody! Hit your wake-up switches!**

Now!'

The audience, not entirely sure that this wasn't still part of the show, started mumbling and moving slowly out of the way as the robot headed towards the

stage

. One woman hit the small glowing dot on the back of her left hand. Nothing

happened. She tapped it again, other audience members now doing the same

thing. No one was being returned to the waking world.

k The Doctor was about to jump down to help when the skeleton he'd questioned

***forger* leapt off the stage and began dragging audience members out of the way.**

Without warning, the left hand of the Rust Reaper swung out and decapitated a

man in the audience. His wife's scream was cut off as the blade arced up and then down, cutting her neatly in two. The audience started screaming and scrambling

out of the way as the robot continued stalking toward the stage.

***Alec* froze solid within the data stream as a life cube appeared, flashed bright red and faded to black. Before he could react another followed suit. Carol swore and stabbed for another stream of information, then swore again.**

'What's happening?' asked Mel, but the two techs ignored her question,

gifting data about and bringing up various displays.

• *'We* need crash beds for them,' said Alec.

'It's too late,' was Carol's reply.

***'We* have to try!'**

'It's too late! Are you having any luck trying to halt the dream cycle?'

• `No. You?'

'None. Everyone's trapped in there.'

***Mel* watched as they worked feverishly away, moving data and checking life-sign Mocks. She noticed the Doctor's, which had electric blue shapes shifting about in IL Carol looked at it, then at Mel.**

'k looks like the Doctor is getting ready to do something major, if I'm reading

his biochemistry and brain signature right.'

'It better be good,' said Alec. He nodded towards the black deck sitting between Diamond and Roily. 'I told you that thing would be trouble.'

The Rust Reaper was almost at the stage.

The Doctor looked at Rolly, who was frantically slapping the spot on his hand.

• 'Don't worry, Roily, I have just the thing to handle this mechanical menace.'

With a smug smile the Doctor reached into a pocket. Then another. With

***teasing alarm he started checking all his pockets. Then the realisation hit. 'Of Nurse, I'm an idiot.'**

'What's wrong?' asked Rolly.

19

`This body is just a dream avatar, it's not real. There's just enough

correspondence between this physique and my own to make me feel like I'm really

here, but that's it.'

'So?'

`So we'd better keep away from that thing until I think of something. It must be

following the original programme that Diamond set down. It's here to fight and

I'm still figuring out the rules.'

The Reaper started to step up onto the stage, only to be momentarily distracted

by the same skeleton band member that had helped get the audience out of its way

moments before. Bone and metal clashed for a few seconds before the Reaper

caught the black skeleton a nasty blow that sent it flying.

The automaton stepped gracefully up onto the stage. Rolly backed away only to

stop abruptly as he realised he was at the edge of the ragged hole. The Reaper

moved towards him, the rust marks that trailed down from its eye sockets looking

like bloody tears.

The Doctor grabbed an electric guitar from one of the black skeletons.

`Doctor, this is hardly the time to begin your music career!'

Ì think you may disagree when you've heard me play! Now, what was that

chord...?'

The Doctor took two steps forward, bringing him within range of the robot's

scythe hand, and played. The chord shattered the Reaper's, left hand, the impact

causing the mechanoid's upper torso to spin. The Doctor gave a triumphant

laugh, then realised too late that the robot's upper body was turning full circle,

building speed and momentum. Too slow to avoid its large right hand, the Doctor

was knocked clean across the stage.

The Rust Reaper grabbed Rolly by the arm and stalked off towards the city of

bone, dragging the screaming manager behind it. The black skeleton wrapped

itself around one of the creature's legs for a moment, only to be sent flying by a

vicious kick that left it lying on the stage next to the Doctor.

`There must be something we can do!' cried Mel, looking at the Doctor's life cube

as it flashed momentarily pink. Carol shook her head.

`The Doctor's only stunned, not dead. He took a beating but he survived it,

that's the main thing.'

`Look, can't we unplug him and everyone else from the set-up?'

`You do that,' said Alec, 'and you'll kill half of them and leave the rest as

vegetables. Look, the Doctor's already recovering. We just have to hope he's as

resourceful as you say.'

The Doctor opened his eyes to see a round-faced man with short, cropped, dark

hair standing over him. 'Are you okay,' asked the man.

Ì simply must stop underestimating robots.' The Doctor thanked the man as he

helped him up. The skeleton stood nearby and shuffled nervously under the

Doctor's scrutiny.

20

f

'So how is everybody, Mr...?'

'Pen. Robin Pen. I'm a critic.'

'A critic, eh? Well, I do hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive my rather

lacklustre performance back there.'

'I was thinking we should all look for an exit point. There should be one

somewhere. I've been trying to keep everyone together and calm while I found out

If you were okay.'

'I' m fine, just a bit winded — it's mainly my dignity that's bruised.' The Doctor

sighed. He quickly dusted himself down then straightened up and looked at the

crowd. 'You did the right thing, Robin. You have a far better chance as a group than separately. And you're right, the dream environment will have been designed with

exits built into it. Standard practice. If you all stay together and head for the forest, t you should be able to find one.'

Robin frowned. 'Aren't you coming with us?'

0

The Doctor shook his head. 'I only wish I were. Can I ask you to continue

leading the group in my absence?'

'I don't know if I'll be any good. I'd never have thought of your trick with the

.;lo; guitar .'

),`l 'You just need to keep a clear head and your wits about you. It's even possible to **lake** control of these environments in the right circumstances. I'm sure you'll do **fine.** Besides, someone has to find Rolly.'

0,, Robin shrugged. 'Okay, if you think that's the best way. I don't like the idea of you doing this alone though.'

' Òh, I won't be alone...' The Doctor smiled and looked over at the skeleton

'Standing nearby.

In the control room, Roily sat up with a gasp. He pulled out the connector, threw **It across** the room and leapt out of his seat, looking warily at the nearby black **deck.** Mel removed the softline jack from her headband and raced over.

'Rolly, are you okay? What's been happening?'

He laughed nervously, his hands shaking. 'What's been happening? You tell me!

Mist Diamond gets eaten, and then we get attacked by cover art.' His voice went

..0, **Wit,** thoughtful. 'The concert's a write-off, everyone will want their money back.'

I 'What happened to the Doctor?'

The little man looked at her. 'I... I think the Doctor is dead. He tried to help me, **but** the Reaper got him. Oh, God! What will the press say? I need to deal with this

!BOW'

'Roily, the Doctor's alive. What attacked you?' Mel was almost screaming at him

UM. She had to know what was going on, try to find a way to help.

,7 The manager turned and pointed towards a poster on the wall that featured an

' **Old man** with a peg leg fighting a rust-streaked robot.

The

bonesville

Rust Reaper. He hit the Doctor and dragged me off. Took me through

then —' he pointed at another painting `— detoured into the Fragile

orest. He dropped me in a clearing. I saw an exit point close by and came out.' He

p**etted** absent-mindedly at the back of his hand. 'The wake-up buttons didn't **21**

work. We're going to look negligent. I have to deal with this now, before it gets out of hand.'

Oblivious to any more of Mel's questions, the small man wandered off.

`Can I call you Jack?' asked the Doctor. The skeleton looked at him with empty eye

sockets, then it shrugged. 'Unless you'd prefer Jill. Only I think I'd find it easier to have a name for you other then "Hey, you".' The black skeleton shrugged again.

They had walked into the city of bone and were now wandering down one of the

smooth streets. 'Jack it is then! Excellent! Now, I get the feeling you know a lot

more about what's going on here than I do. Would that be right?'

He avoided looking at the Doctor for a few moments, and then gave a small nod.

Èver played twenty questions?'

Jack leapt at the Doctor, grabbed him and dragged him into a nearby building.

The Doctor asked what was going on and the skeleton indicated the street. From

the doorway the pair watched as a large dragon landed near to where they had

been standing moments before. The creature had the head of a sour-faced,

middle-aged woman, complete with curlers.

'Dreadful Debbie the Dragon Lady, from the *Leviathan* Wept album...' whispered the Doctor. 'Well, she may be "a horror to behold", but she hasn't reckoned with my charm.' Before Jack could stop him, the Doctor stepped out onto the street and

bowed low.

`Delighted to meet you, madam. I'm the Doctor and I take it you would be the

lovely Debbie?' The Dragon Lady looked at him for a few moments, her gaze

appearing to soften. Then without warning she opened her mouth and issued

forth with a stream of flaming abuse, the burning words racing towards the

Doctor.

'HOW DARE YOU EVEN TALK TO ME, YOU FILTHY BUCKET OF PUS!'

The Doctor only barely made it inside, his eyebrows singed, his hair smoking.

`Jack, I think we're in trouble.'

Robin the critic was leading the forty or so audience members through the glass

forest when they heard expletives echoing across from the city. A few of his

charges stopped and muttered nervously.

`Keep moving, everybody, there has to be an exit point somewhere.' He looked

towards the city where he could see a faint smudge of smoke. Robin silently

prayed for the Doctor as he started walking again.

`Nor said Carol.

`But you have to send me in, the Doctor needs me!' Mel was frantic. The

Doctor's life cube was still showing that he was okay but there was no doubt that

he wouldn't be for much longer. They had to listen, had to let her help him.

At that moment Roily walked in, talking into a communicator. He seemed a lot

calmer than before. Mel removed the connector from her headband and the data

streams and life cubes vanished. She walked over to Roily, who waved her off,

frowning.

22

'And they'll be here in a quarter of an hour? Good, I'll be ready.' He switched off the communicator and looked at Mel. 'Sorry, Mel, still trying to fix this dog's

breakfast. How's the Doctor doing?'

'He's surviving but I'm sure he needs my help. Carol and Alec refuse to send me

ht. Please, Roily, make them see reason.'

The manager was already shaking his head. 'Mel, I'm sorry but it's too

dangerous. That blasted deck is out of control.'

Calmer now, Mel asked him what had gone wrong.

'I've begged Diamond to get rid of it but *he refused.* It's his muse, he says.

Inspires him with the stories for his songs.'

Mel frowned. 'How can a computer be his muse?'

There was a long nervous pause, and then Carol spoke up.

'It used to belong to the worst cyberkiller this system has ever seen. And

Diamond never scrubbed the original Al template.'

The audience had reached the edge of the forest. In front of them lay an open plain of tartan grass and in the middle of it, about five hundred metres away, floated a

doorway with a small exit sign.

Robin looked about to make sure the coast was clear, then turned to the crowd.

'The exit is across this plain. Now it may look clear but we can't take any

chances: I want everyone to sprint for it. Okay, now go!'

Dreadful Debbie had given up on trying to burn her way through the bone walls

1 • Aid was now simply smashing at them with her paws and spiked tail. The building Was shaking, the walls splintering under the pounding.

'Nothing for it, Jack, we have to make a run for it. Now, when I count to three I

;,,Meant you to run like mad. Understand?'

k The skeleton shook his head and pointed to the dragon. The Doctor sighed.

'Yes, I know it's dangerous, but so is staying here.' As if to emphasise his point, **the** building shook under another impact. Somewhere, something cracked loudly.

Ilk pointed in the direction of the dragon, and then tapped the back of his bony Wrist. The Doctor got the message.

'Okay, so what are we waiting for?'

Jack led the Doctor around to a spot where a wall had splintered enough that **they**

creaked could just glimpse the dragon slamming herself against the walls. The ceiling

, dust fell — the building couldn't last much longer.

Suddenly the dragon paused for a moment, as if in thought, then vanished.

*tabbing the Doctor's hand, the black skeleton led the way as the pair ran out of

the building.

t '**All** right, Jack,' said the Doctor firmly as he allowed himself to be hurried down **dream** , **the street.** 'Time we spoke properly. Now, one

for yes, two for no. You're not a 1,

prop.' There was a pause as they walked along.

1 t, '**I'm** right, aren't I?'

, **Jack** clacked his jaws together loudly, once.

* * *

23

The audience was about halfway between the forest and the exit when the boiling

cloud of blackness appeared in front of them. Tendrils from the cloud instantly

snatched up two of the black-clad teenagers and dragged them inside itself. They

could be heard screaming horribly for a few moments, then silence.

`Scatter!' screamed Robin. 'Spread out and try to get to the exit, it's our only

hope.'

The evil black cloud started towards the nearest of the group.

Carol swore. Quietly Mel asked how many and was told two. No, three now

`There has to be something we can do,' she said, getting frustrated, angry.

Carol and Alec shook their heads. 'Nothing,' said Carol. 'They either have to

find an exit or they need a miracle.'

Shaking, Mel strode towards the door. 'Where's Rolly? It sounded like he was

organising help before.'

She pressed the button and the door slid open. In front of her was a

sea of faces,

cameras and other recording equipment. They were all looking at Rolly who was

saying `... had always lived with the danger of his muse, but even he never expected anything like this to happen. Now, any more questions?'

`You little toad!' screamed Mel. She turned and stormed back into the control

room. Alec and Carol both realised what she was going to do and only managed to

get in each other's way as they raced to stop her.

They were too late: Mel went limp, plugged directly into ,the deck beside her.

Jack had led the Doctor to a gigantic skull palace in the middle of the city and taken him inside.

Ì' m assuming you know where you're going,' said the Doctor.

CLACK.

Àre you going to help me once we get there?'

CLACK, CLACK.

`Why not?'

There was a long pause, the only sound the soft clomp of the Doctor's shoes and

the regular tapping of Jack's bony feet.

'I don't suppose you know Morse code by any chance?'

The door to the control room opened. 'Look, Mel, you have to understand. I'm still

Diamond's manager and...' Rolly's voice trailed off as he saw the figure in the

chair. His eyes widened. With a *cry* of 'No!' he ran across the room and

reached out to pull off the headband. Alec tackled him to the ground.

`We have to get her out of there! We have to!' screamed Rolly.

`Chief, it's too late! You'll kill her if you try.'

Rolly looked up at him. 'You don't understand. From what Diamond's told me

about some of the things he's dealt with in there, she may be better off dead.'

Mel stared wide-eyed around her.

It was the most beautiful library she'd ever seen. Thousands of bound hardback

books resting upon wooden shelves that stretched off to infinity. Stained glass

windows let in the warm afternoon light.

Get with it, Mel, she thought. There are lives at stake. But where to start?

`Can I help you?' said a soft voice from behind her. Mel turned and saw a woman

***of* around sixty, her face softly lined, her grey hair tied in a bun. She looked every loch the stereotypical librarian.**

'Yes,' said Mel. 'How do I shut off the dream concert?'

'You can't. It can only be shut off by the operator. If you were to try, it would likely destroy everyone within.' Her voice was sad, pained.

`But the program is killing people.'

`No, it isn't. The program is merely a template on which a prearranged

dreamscape can be constructed. It's killing nobody.'

'Then it's the computer. It used to belong to a murderer. Maybe

he left a virus.'

Mel was getting desperate again, didn't this woman realise... ? Wait a minute. She was inside a virtual environment. The woman looked at her sadly.

'I've killed no one, though I am being used to slay once more. And the ache in

my soul is like an open wound.'

'Then who is doing it?'

'I m .we weren't many of them left now. They'd tried running back to the forest but Me liquid blackness kept picking them off.

Robin watched in horror as it engulfed another person and knew he'd never

beget the screams. These people had trusted him and, damn it, he was going to

e them! He shouted for everyone to make for the exit, and then started running

for the cloud.

'Come on!' he screamed from the patterned grass. 'You want someone, what

about me?' The cloud rippled and a voice, deep with menace, issued forth from it.

It Rid one word.

'You!'

'Okay, that doesn't sound good,' said Robin quietly as he began to back away

bowl the darkness. The black, shapeless mass moved towards him, rippling as it

Mined to laugh.

robin

stopped and looked up at the approaching cloud. What had the Doctor

Mid about changing things?

The Doctor and Jack reached a doorway. Behind the door they could hear a

t booming laugh. The Doctor peered around the corner and nodded. 'As I thought,

he said quietly. 'Diamond Sharp.'

I'Jibe librarian was talking quietly as she recounted the story of her first owner to Mel. 'By the time they'd caught her, she'd killed hundreds. It seems a collector had lien bribed some people into giving the deck to him intact. He died many years

bet and the family sold the computer, not knowing its history or worth. I had

begun writing songs to deal with what I had done. Diamond claimed those songs

as his own and built a career from them.'

`That's terrible. You just let him steal your work?'

The librarian looked at her. 'Mel, I am only a machine. Everything I am belongs

to him.' She paused a moment, then smiled. 'Besides, it was nice to know that

people enjoyed my music. Eventually, though, I was ready to move on. I wanted to

grow and experience more than my ancient pain. That was when Diamond's

career ended. He tried for a while to force me to write for him, but what I create is for myself. Diamond may own it, but he does not control it.

`Then he came up with a plan. Hold one last concert, murder everybody there,

destroy me, claim I was the killer and sell his story for millions. Interviews, movie deals and so on...'

Ànd you're letting him...' Mel's voice trailed off at the horror of it all.

'I belong to him, to do with as he wishes. But rest assured, Mel, it pains me to

be used to slay once more.'

The darkness was close; Robin knew that, *even* with his eyes closed. He could feel the energy crackling around it as it neared him.

`Must concentrate, must will it away...'

The Doctor and Jack strode into the great hall where, floating in a ball of energy, Diamond Sharp was still in his youthful, giant form. He was reaching out to crush

a miniature figure of Robin.

'A one-note hack you called me! Your death will be slow!',

`Personally I think he's right, Sharp,' yelled the Doctor. 'You *are* a one-note hack!'

The critic vanished.

The crackling of energy stopped. Everything went quiet. Robin opened an eye and

seeing the cloud was gone, punched the air. 'Yes!'

There was still a handful of people standing about, watching him. 'Come on,

get out of here. I don't know if I can do that again.' They ran for the exit.

The librarian smiled.

The Doctor's made his move. There may yet be a chance to end this.'

Mel looked at her. 'How do you know?'

'Through my avatar, it's travelling with the Doctor. He calls it Jack.'

The librarian handed Mel a book. She opened it and there was a black and white

woodcut image. It was moving and the faint sounds of footsteps issued forth from

the volume. The angle made it seem like Mel was walking in with the Doctor. The

picture's point of view was behind and to one side of the Time Lord. The giant

figure of Diamond Sharp turned to look at them.

'Who the hell are you?' he boomed.

'Me? I'm called the Doctor, and this is my new friend Jack. I must say, Diamond,

I'm rather disappointed. Very shoddy work. No original creations, just characters

from your album covers or your lyrics. What a waste of the medium.'

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The twenty-foot-tall figure of Diamond Sharp stepped from the energy bubble.

As he did he started to shift and change. Within moments he stood before them, **u an** angel wielding a fiery sword.

'Well then, Doctor, let me show you what I can do!'

'**Please,**' said Mel, not daring to take her eyes off the image as the angel stalked **towards**

the Doctor, 'you have to help him!'

The librarian's voice sounded strained. 'I can't. The Doctor must help himself.'

'**And that's meant to impress** me?' The Doctor started to walk towards Diamond **end with each step he became larger until he was slightly taller than the angel.**

'Angels with fiery swords, an image that's existed for thousands of years. I'm

liming to think Mr Pen was overly generous.'

Diamond screamed and his wings opened wide as he swung the sword at the

Doctor. The Doctor didn't even move as it sliced into him, but his substance **appeared** to change. One moment he was flesh, then water, extinguishing the

word. The Doctor became solid once the sword was clear, grabbed Diamond's

hands and threw him across the room. The giant rock star skidded along the floor **And hit the wall with a crash.**

'Give it up, Diamond. Even if I wasn't more creative than you, I have a thousand yens of experiences to draw upon to beat you.'

Diamond looked at the Doctor and smiled.

'No!' cried the librarian.

Mel looked at her. 'What's wrong?' The woman didn't appear to hear her; she

simply hung her head in defeat. Mel looked back at the screen and saw movement.

The Doctor saw something out the corner of his eye and turned. Bright white

***apes** were rising up from the floor, shifting and changing as they surrounded **Min.** They were hard to focus on, like living Rorschach inkblots in negative, as **they** writhed and flowed. The Doctor found reminders in the forms as they slowly

*died him. Each time his perception seemed to be about to suggest a particular

Iife

he was form, it subtly and gracefully changed under his gaze. Was that a Zygon? No, becoming a spider; now a Vervoid. None of the shapes would settle. Instead

them

a gestalt

was merely a collection of déjà vu moments, brief fragments of recognition,

of various creatures he had fought over the millennia.

The Doctor shook his head, smiling. 'Diamond, Diamond, Diamond. Trying to

Ism out what to use to defeat me, are you?' he said. 'Then may I suggest Daleks?

Most of what you've hinted at so far are very much the bottom of the barrel. All very **Ugly beaten.**'

One of the almost

slaughtered

formless beings spoke in a hissing voice. 'You mean

...'

The Doctor's

figures

smile vanished as he turned to look at one of the slowly morphing

. 'What?'

Another spoke. 'You murdered the Vervoids. Not a seed was left. There are so 2 7

many planets in the universe where they could have been left in peace, but instead

you massacred them all.'

`They were out of control, killing innocent people...'

Now another silhouette, an embryonic giant crab, spoke. 'Humans kill millions

of animals for food every day, the animals are innocent yet you let the

humans live.'

`Humans are the Doctor's favourites,' said another Rorschach shape that hinted

at a large insectoid form even as it started to become something else. 'Remember

how he poisoned the Silurians? Had they been Earthmen he would have found a

peaceful way to stop them.'

`Now, wait a minute!' cried the Doctor. 'I tried to reason with them... and all of

you! You were bent on exterminating humanity! Dominating the universe at all

costs!' The beings began to become more distinct, starting to take on the features of a race from his recent past. 'Don't even bother!' he yelled. 'If any of you, for a single moment, had been in any way reasonable, things may have turned out better for all

concerned.' The white amorphous blobs started losing focus, fading back into the

polished bone floor. 'But, no! All or nothing! Take what you want or die trying!'

The fluid shapes had dwindled until there was a last small blob struggling to

take form.

`Well, your own avarice was your undoing, so begone foul muckworm!' The

writhing lump made a sad squelch as the Doctor trod on it. He then turned back

to Diamond.

Ùsing the link to dig about in my subconscious thoughts, eh? Nice try but I'm

a pragmatic man and have dealt with my demons. Maybe you should

take the fact

that I've defeated so many races as an object lesson and simply give up now.'

Diamonds eyes took on a steely gaze and the walls shifted. The Doctor rolled his

eyes tiredly and sighed.

Mel frowned, trying to understand what it was she was seeing through Jack's eyes.

It looked like a small laboratory. The frown deepened as she spotted the TARDIS

in the corner.

The Doctor looked around the old UNIT lab. 'Just like the rest,' he said quietly.

`Doesn't know when he should give up.'

He glanced over and noticed something on the workbench and picked it up. It

was a small complex piece of equipment. 'It's my dematerialisation circuit. Oh,

and it's broken! Of all the things... no... wait a minute.' He frowned. 'The codes...

The dematerialisation codes... I can't remember them.'

'Now, Doctor, put that thing down, I have a little job for you,' said Brigadier

Lethbridge-Stewart from behind him

The Doctor turned and there was his old friend, dressed in an organ-grinder's

outfit. 'Brigadier, what on Earth are you doing in that outrageous get-up?'

`Doctor, I'll thank you to treat me with a little respect. While you're living on my planet, you'll obey my rules. Now, dance!'

As the Brigadier started to crank the handle on an organ, the Doctor frowned

and backed away, shaking his head. The music was deafening, discordant, cutting

through his mind like a knife. He noticed Jack watching him from the corner.

'Jack,' he cried. 'Jack, help me!' The small black skeleton didn't move.

`Doctor...' The Brigadier's voice had a warning tone to it. 'You're not dancing...'

The Doctor tried to ignore him 'We both know you're more than a machine.

You have to help me!'

Jack stood unmoving.

What's wrong with him? I've never seen the Doctor so... so lost. Please, you have to help him!'

The librarian shook her head and opened her mouth to speak but Mel cut her

off.

Sad **'Don't tell me you're only a computer! I work with them. Computers don't feel**

or write songs as therapy! You have a mind and a will of your own. The Doctor loves the songs you've written, that's why he came to this concert!'

'Mel -'

'You wanted to stop this happening and you tried to get the Doctor to do your

dirty work. Well, now he's going to die if you don't help him!'

The librarian was shaking, tears running down her cheeks. 'I'm

only a

Machine,' she said softly.

Mel's voice was filled with venom. 'As far as I'm concerned, if the Doctor dies Ws you that killed him.'

The librarian threw back her head and howled in anguish -

- and Mel jerked awake on the couch. She'd been kicked out.

'You okay?' asked Alec tentatively.

Mel nodded, unplugged the jack and looked over at Diamond resting peacefully

on the chair. There was a light smile on his lips. He was going to kill the Doctor.

Her

reached eyes narrowed and her stomach knotted up at the thought. Hand shaking, she out for the cable connecting Diamond directly to his deck.

Carol and Alec both grabbed her and she struggled, trying to reach the cable.

• 'You don't understand! Diamond's the one doing this! He's going to kill the

Doctor!'

e Brigadier kept turning the handle on the organ, the music breaking through

the Doctor's concentration. 'You will dance for me, Doctor! You want a place to

May? Dance. If you want equipment to repair that wretched machine of yours,

4 dance, little monkey! *Dance, I say!'*

The Doctor was on his knees, hands clasped over his ears, trying desperately to

drown out the sound.

The Doctor had sworn it would never happen again.

Dependent on others but still so alone.

Trapped once more in a single time.

On a single planet.

The Brigadier pulled out his gun and took aim at the figure kneeling in front of him. 'Goodbye, old chap.'

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A black, skeletal hand punched through his chest from behind, holding his

still-beating heart out in front of him. 'Oh, I say.'

The Brigadier shifted and changed into Diamond, who laughed as he looked at

the skeletal hand holding his heart. 'It takes more than that to stop me!'

`Yes,' said the Doctor quietly. 'There's only one way to stop a musician.'

And the walls fell away.

From out of the dark they came — critics calling Diamond a has-been, walking

newspapers asking 'Where is Diamond now?' at the bottom of page ten, crowds of

people of all ages saying 'Diamond who?' More and more of them. The musician

yelled at them, telling them who he was, screaming his own name again and

again, but they kept coming.

The Doctor stood watching the scene impassively. Someone came and stood

beside him. The Doctor glanced around to see the Brigadier, back in fill military

uniform.

Ì say, Doctor, who's that chap on the floor?'

`No one, Brigadier. But his name used to be Diamond Sharp.'

`Never heard of him.'

And Diamond curled up in a corner crying; lost, alone and unknown...

Rolly was pacing back and forth, looking anxious. Diamond's unconscious form

had been moved to a crash bed — he was in a coma. The Doctor and Mel were now

both connected up to the black deck. Robin came up and stood beside him.

Ì' m sure the Doctor and his friend are fine, Rolly.'

`That thing gives me the creeps.'

Mel's eyes snapped open startling them. 'We told you, she's perfectly safe.'

Ìndeed,' said the Doctor, sitting up. 'You'll have to get used to her if you're

going to be her new manager.' The Doctor smiled at the look on Rolly's facèManage that thing?! Not on your life!'

The Doctor got up out of the reclining chair and scratched the back of his head,

obviously thrown by Rolly's resistance to the idea. 'Well, if you will pass up the

hottest new songwriter in decades, I'm sure she can find someone else to manage

her.'

Roily shifted from nervous to shrewd faster than it was possible to

comprehend.

`What do you mean?'

`Diamond only played a small portion of her catalogue of songs, the ones that

fit his style.' The Doctor nodded towards the black deck. 'There's your star, you

only need to find someone to do the singing.'

Mel unplugged herself from the deck and sat up. Ànd she needs you, Roily.

There are no laws protecting the intellectual property of artificially created life.

And, according to the Doctor, if anyone can get people to recognise her rights, it's you.'

The Doctor clamped his hands on Rolly's shoulders and looked him in the *eye*.

`Find some singers who need a career boost, and give them her songs to sing. You

can manage a star unlike any other in the history of entertainment, and have

dozens of new stars begin their careers under your guiding hand.'

'Well, I mustn't keep you,' said the manager hurriedly as he sat on the couch.

'It's always a pleasure, Doctor.' He swung his body onto the chair and picked up

the jack that led directly to the black deck. 'A pleasure meeting you also, Mel.

Goodbye.' He jacked in and went limp, a smile on his lips.

Robin grinned at the pair. 'Well, with Roily behind it, I'm sure the AI will have a **Feat** career ahead of her.'

'Yes, she will.'

After saying their goodbyes, the Doctor was unusually quiet.

'Penny for your thoughts?' asked Mel as they walked through the deserted, early

morning streets on their way back to the TARDIS.

'I was just thinking about Diamond and how he let his anxieties put him on such a destructive path. When confronted with his fears of obscurity, he simply couldn't cope.' The Doctor went quiet for a while.

'Did I ever tell you that I spent a few years trapped on Earth?' he eventually said.

Mel looked surprised. 'No, is that what all the business with the organ-grinder was?'

'I was terrified of being trapped on Earth forever, living one day after the other like everyone else. The man with the organ is a good friend of mine, someone who I was often very rude to for no other reason than he was there and I needed him.'

They walked in silence for a few moments, then the Doctor spoke. He was

smiling slightly. 'Maybe we should drop in and see Alastair.'

'Who?'

'The organ-grinder.'

They reached the alley containing the TARDIS. It was parked next to a brick wall covered in graffiti and old adverts. The Doctor opened the doors.

'After that, it might be nice to visit my old lab,' he said as he ushered Mel inside.

The doors closed and a few seconds later the ship faded away noisily, revealing a poster on the wall.

Diamond Sharp stared blindly into the empty alley, the brightly coloured words

beneath his face proclaiming 'Last Concert Ever!'

03.17

Undercurrents

Gary Merchant

Zoe stood in the doorway of the laboratory in a state of shock. Dressed only in her pyjamas and dressing gown, she was unsure of what to do for the first time in her

young life. Certainly, no logic or theory had prepared her for this. Acting on

instinct, she dashed out from the laboratory, her footsteps echoing through the

h**alf-lit**

corridors of the TARDIS. An uncharacteristic sense of dread had gripped

her, which only eased once she had arrived at Jamie's room. Throwing open the **door,** she ran to his bedside and shook him by his shoulders. 'Jamie, wake up!'

He looked up though half-closed eyes. 'Zoe? What's the matter? It's the

middle of the night.'

When she told him, the Highlander sounded doubtful. 'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure. One minute I could hear him working in his laboratory, the

next.. well, nothing.'

'Maybe he went off for a walk. He's like that sometimes.'

she said sternly. 'Come and see for yourself.'

'**All** right,' he said. 'Give me a minute to get dressed. You'd better do the same.'

She nodded, and made to leave, pausing in the doorway. 'I... I'll meet you in the **laboratory,**' she said, before closing the door behind her.

They had been searching for some time, with no success. They knew the likely **places he would be, but** there had been no luck. Eventually Zoe and Jamie decided **to** split up so they could cover more ground. They agreed to meet back at the **control** room half an hour later and checked that their watches had the same time.

The watches had been a welcome present from the Doctor. 'If we're travelling in **the** vortex for any length of time,' he had told them, 'then at least you'll both have **a better** idea of the concept of real time.'

The two friends covered as much of the TARDIS as they knew. While Jamie went **to check the** cloister room and one or two other places he'd only heard about, Zoe **looked in on the** power room, the sleeping quarters — twice — and myriad other **looks** and crannies. As she went deeper into the TARDIS without finding any sign **of the** Doctor, she began to lose hope.

'**He** can't have just vanished,' she insisted after they had both returned to the

,control room.

'**Zoe,** normally I'd agree with you,' Jamie replied. 'But like I've heard you say, you **can't** disprove the facts.'

Those words now came back to haunt her. `No,' she conceded. 'No, you're right, **Jamie.'** Zoe's next comment was the only logical one, but there was a tremor in her **voice** as she said it. 'We have to face it. He's gone — the Doctor's gone.'

* * *

A few moments later, they were back in the laboratory. Jamie had been pacing the

floor for what seemed like an age, but had only been a matter of minutes. Nothing

had been touched. A circuit board lay on the floor, discarded. Jamie couldn't make

sense of any of this, but he refused to give in to despair. All right, he's

disappeared. But he's gone off on his own before.'

`But this is different,' Zoe stressed. 'We're still in flight' The TARDIS was

indeed travelling through the vortex of space and time, and had been for a few

days. 'He couldn't just open the doors and walk out'

Jamie scratched his head. Ì'll agree with you there,' he admitted. 'It's a puzzle

and no mistake.' It was such an impossible puzzle that he began to wonder if Zoe

was being completely honest with him. Maybe the Doctor was hiding somewhere

they hadn't looked, waiting for the right time to leap out and say 'surprise'. And

what if Zoe was in on the joke? Having had his leg pulled often, Jamie wondered if

this was the latest in another of the Doctor's wheezes. Zoe had not long since

come on board, so maybe the Doctor thought this prank would make her feel

more at home.

But Zoe's concern did seem real enough. 'He must have been kidnapped

somehow,' she said.

Jamie decided to play along. 'Maybe so. But we can argue over the wheres and

the whys later. Right now we've got something else to worry about'

`What do you mean?'

`Well, there's just us here,' he said. 'And neither of us knows how to fly the

TARDIS. For all we know, we'll carry on as we are, flying through space and

time...'

until we hit something?' It was clear that Zoe hadn't considered this before.

He shrugged. 'Well, I didn't like to say, but..'

Òh, this is an impossible situation!'

If it had been a joke, Jamie would surely have been on the point of catching her

out there and then, but now he could see that Zoe was very frightened. This was

clearly no game. As he began to accept her word, Jamie knew he had to reassure

her. 'Maybe we'll be all right,' he said. 'But tell it to me again, Zoe. What

happened?'

He listened patiently as she repeated what she had told him. 'I was having

trouble sleeping, so I got up and went to make myself a hot drink. I had to pass by the laboratory, and the Doctor was there, working on one of his pet projects.'

She smiled at the memory, and Jamie returned the smile, knowing it was just the

sort of thing the Doctor did while they slept.

Ànyway' she continued, 'on the way back, I heard this crash from the

laboratory. When I got there, there was a broken circuit board on the floor, and no sign of the Doctor.' Zoe looked up at Jamie, her eyes

pleading. 'He couldn't have

run off, because it's a straight walk past the laboratory - I would have seen him.'

Ànd you didn't imagine it? No trick of the light?'

`Jamie, I was wide awake, and the laboratory was in plain sight Of course I

didn't imagine id'

He was quick to appease her. `No, I never doubted you for a second.'

'**Oh,** Jamie.' Zoe looked to him for an answer. 'What on Earth are we supposed **to do?**'

'**Do?** Aye, well —'

Their conversation was halted by a strange sound. At first neither of them could

place it. They traced the sound from the laboratory to the control room, and then **to** the main doors. From outside, someone was knocking on the door of the

TARDIS.

'**I hear it,**' he replied. 'I'm just not sure if I believe it.'

Still the knocking continued. And now there was a voice — muffled, but insistent

and pleading. 'Help. Please, please help me.'

Zoe looked from Jamie to the doors. 'It couldn't be the Doctor. Not **outside.**'

The knocking and the pleading continued.

'**Well,** let's see.' Jamie hurried to the console and looked for the scanner switch, **one of** the few he could recognise, and pressed it. The screen showed the vortex **around** them, heading towards and passing them by in one continuous motion.

The outer edge of the TARDIS could also be seen. Jamie pointed. 'There. D'you **see?'**

Zoe stared at the image, her mouth open in shock. Crouched against the outside

Of

vortex

the TARDIS was a small humanoid shape, shivering against the pull of the

. 'Is **it the Doctor?'**

'If it is, what's he doing out there?' Jamie **said.**

'Never mind that. We've got to help him Zoe made for the switch that opened

the main doors. Her hand almost touched it, but Jamie blocked her.

'Are you mad, Zoe? Open those doors and we'd be sucked out of the TARDIS

before we knew it.' Still fresh in his mind was a time when such a thing had indeed **happened. It wasn't a memory to savour.**

The knocking continued, the voice calling out 'Please. I cannot last much

longer.'

Zoe looked up at the scanner. 'We can't just leave him out there

With Zoe looking to him for answers, Jamie dared not fail her. But what would

the Doctor do...? 'All right then,' he decided. 'Isn't there something the Doctor UM to protect the TARDIS from the... the vortex?'

'You mean the force field?'

'Aye, that's the thing. Which of these switches turns it on?'

Zoe quickly found and flipped a switch. 'Force field on, Jamie.'

He positioned himself by the main entrance. 'Right, now you can open the

doors. But hang onto something.'

flattening her body against the console, Zoe pushed a button. Immediately

winds gusted through the ship, but not as harshly as they might have done without the force field reducing their ferocity. Choosing his moment, Jamie **reached out and grabbed an outstretched hand, then hauled the shaking bundle inside, the**

doors closing quickly behind them.

Jamie fell back on the floor, taking in deep shuddering breaths. Zoe hurried to

the barely conscious figure they had rescued. 'It's all right,' she said. 'You're safe **now.'** She helped the stranger to a nearby chair.

Jamie hauled himself to his feet and looked down at their extra passenger, full

of questions. Whoever he was, it was clear that he was not the Doctor. 'Now,

what's going on?' he demanded. 'What have you done with the Doctor?'

Zoe stared at him. 'Jamie, you can't think he had anything to do with all of this?'

Ànd why not?' Jamie glared accusingly at the stranger. 'The Doctor vanishes,

and then straight away this one turns up. It's too much of a coincidence, Zoe.'

`Well, if he was involved in some way,' Zoe pointed out, 'then why would he turn

up here?'

'Och, I don't know.' Jamie's stance would not so easily be broken. 'But I don't

trust him.' He stood over the stranger, now slumped in the chair. 'C'mon, wake

up. You've got some explaining to do.'

`Well, give him a chance, won't you?' Zoe scolded. 'After what he's been through

out there he's probably not in the mood for questions.'

`Well, he won't be in the mood for much else when I've finished with him.'

As Jamie took a step nearer, the stranger raised his head and looked up at them

both for the first time. He looked from one to the other, a question on his lips. 'Is this a test?' His voice was rich and deep, and he spoke slowly and calmly. 'Am I to act as mediator in your argument?'

Jamie hesitated. This was not the reaction he had expected. A protest of

innocence, yes. Or a flinch away from Jamie's fist. There was not even a trace of

arrogance from the stranger, only a look of serene calm. He seemed completely

unaware that he had become the subject of a rather heated discussion. Jamie let his arms drop, but still eyed the man with suspicion.

It was Zoe who broke the awkward silence. 'It's just that the Doctor, a friend of

ours, has gone missing. Then you suddenly arrive, and... well, you can see how it

looks.'

He nodded. 'I wish I could help, but I know nothing of this "Doctor" you speak of.'

Àye, if you say so.' Jamie wasn't convinced. It didn't help his mood

that Zoe

seemed willing to accept this person at face value.

Zoe turned back to the stranger. 'Well, if you could give us some kind of

explanation,' she prompted.

`Yes, it is right that you should know.' The figure sat up straighter in the chair, allowing Jamie and Zoe their first **proper** look at him. He had a young face; his dark hair was long and sleek, tied back in a ponytail. To all intents and purposes, his appearance was that of a young nobleman - but without the airs and graces,

Jamie noted, and his clothes were in tatters. 'My name is Vorac,' he announced, his voice becoming stronger by the second. 'I am a Time Rider. The time winds are my

home.'

'Oh, come on!' Jamie exclaimed. 'D'you mean to say you live... out there?'

'We...' Vorac searched for the correct words exist.'

Zoe picked **up** on this. 'There are more of you?'

He nodded. 'We ride in packs, travelling the winds of time, embracing the ever

changing vortex.' Vorac looked up at his two rescuers. 'And yet, it appears we are

not the only riders.'

Jamie grudgingly accepted the compliment for both of them. 'We're just

WMHers. Passing through, you might say,' he muttered.

'With the aid of this vessel?' Vorac was full of admiration. 'Incredible.'

'So, what happened?' Zoe pressed. 'How did you come to be here?'

that 'Like many winds, there are undercurrents,' Vorac began. 'Unexpected pockets blow stronger than the rest. Such an undercurrent struck our pack, and we

were scattered. I took the brunt of it and was thrown into the centre of the vortex Itself- into the same path as your vessel. I managed to ride the vortex well enough $0 reach your craft and hold onto the exterior, until you rescued me. For which, of eourse, I am very grateful. It is a dangerous place, the vortex. There are things out there - "creatures" is the most apposite word, I believe - that hunt their prey on Ii winds. They are elusive.., when it suits them.'

Vorac 'Well, that's just fine for you, isn't it?' Jamie had heard enough. In his eyes, this was a danger to them, but Zoe seemed to have been taken in by this

vagabond. In a fit of anger, Jamie stormed out of the control room.

Issue just wanted to put as much distance between himself and Vorac as was

rate. But Vorac had immediately followed him, which made Jamie all the more

ted. 'Leave me alone, why don't you?'

Vorac looked puzzled. 'Have! offended you in some way?'

Jamie spun round to face him. 'You might fool Zoe, but not me.'

'Zoe.' Vorac thought for a moment. 'Is she your... partner?'

'She's a friend,' Jamie replied tersely. 'And friends look out for each other. So if you hurt her...' He raised a fist to illustrate his point.

'I mean her no harm,' Vorac assured him. 'Nor to yourself'

'I don't mean that, and you know it!' Jamie searched for words that the Time

Rider would understand. 'Seems to me you'd like her to be your partner.'

Vorac hesitated for a moment before answering. 'I think I

understand your

concerns

, but your fears are unfounded.'

'Aye, you would say that, just to keep things nice and cosy. But you don't fool him In a quick movement, Jamie's hands were around Vorac's throat. He slammed

against the wall. 'Now, what have you done with the Doctor? Tell me!'

Vorac struggled helplessly. 'I don't know,' he cried. 'I don't know this Doctor of

***0 'Liar!' Jamie slammed the Time Rider against the wall again. 'I'll loosen your alogue, see if! don't'**

I'm telling you the truth,' Vorac insisted. 'L.' His legs abruptly buckled under as his body went limp. Surprised by this, Jamie's grip slackened. Vorac fell to

I. Boor in a dead faint.

t Anger gave way to shock. Had he killed Vorac? Had he also signed the Doctor's

***eh warrant? He knelt down over the Time Rider, feeling for a pulse. 'Oh, no,'**

he

moaned. 'What have I done?'

Untie! What have you done?' He looked up at Zoe, standing over him with an

egression of horror on her face.

* * *

`So, what happened?'

`Nothing,' Jamie protested. `Vorac just collapsed.'

Zoe eyed him suspiciously, but he said no more. Now back in the control room,

they set Vorac down onto a chair. Zoe felt his forehead. 'He seems very weak.'

`Weak? You mean he'd not dead?' Jamie swallowed hard. 'I meant...'

Zoe stared at him, incredulously. 'Jamie? What did you mean?'

`Nothing. I...'

`You thought he'd died!' Zoe was beside herself with rage. 'I find you crouched

over Vorac, and I don't know what to think. Then you come up with some story

about him having fainted or whatever. If! didn't know better, I'd have thought you

were trying to kill him.' An unwelcome idea came to her. 'Or is that really what

happened? Perhaps if I hadn't arrived when I did, I would have been none the

wiser. Is that it, Jamie?' She scared herselfwith what she said next. 'What sort of a person are you, to want to murder someone in cold blood?'

He took a step toward her. 'Zoe, it wasn't like that I...'

She backed away, nervously. 'Don't you dare come near me, Jamie McCrimmon.

At this moment, I'm not sure if I trust you anymore.' She looked to Vorac, who was

still unconscious. 'You can carry him to one of the bedrooms, but don't you dare

try anything.'

Looking numb, Jamie gently hefted Vorac into his arms and carried him the

short walk to the nearest spare room. Only the bare essentials were there, but it

would suffice. A tearful Jamie laid Vorac down on the bed, then silently exited the room, leaving Zoe alone with the Time Rider. Only when the door was closed did

her own tears begin to fall. She sank down into a chair, her head in her hands, as

her body began to shake uncontrollably.

Was this how her future was to be?

Jamie had never felt so alone. In his own time, during the battle at Culloden, he'd had many friends. Now, in the TARDIS, he had no one. He thought he had coped

after Victoria had elected to remain on Earth. But now the Doctor was gone. And

Zoe hated him, when all he had tried to do was look out for her.

In the space of an hour, he'd lost the only two friends he had. What now was to

become of him?

Vorac awoke to a sound he did not recognise. Turning towards the source, he saw

Zoe, curled up in a chair, hands over her face, her body quivering. Instinctively,

Vorac knew there was something wrong, but he could not put it into words. 'Zoe?'

He saw her face then, and could see moisture glistening on her skin. A word

came into his mind — tears. Zoe was shedding tears, but for what reason?

Intuitively he knew the answer. 'Have I caused you pain?'

She shook her head. 'Not especially,' she replied haltingly. 'It's just that.. well, Jamie and I have had a big argument I'm not sure I want to stay in the TARDIS

after this.'

Às bad as that?' Vorac pulled himself up to a seating position. 'I seem to have

become a burden to you both.'

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Zoe dried her eyes. 'It's just that with the Doctor gone, and then you turning up Immediately afterwards, I suppose it's only natural for Jamie to be suspicious of

you.'

Vorac nodded. 'I can see his point of view. And you, Zoe? Do you distrust me?'

don't think so.' She now seemed more composed. 'But we know so little about

you, and I'm afraid Jamie's rather prone to talking with his fists. I hope he didn't Mitt you too badly.'

'Ah.' Vorac thought back to the earlier confrontation. 'You should know that

jamie

is not responsible for my current state of health.'

'How can you say that? I found you on the floor, with Jamie standing over you...'

Vorac sought to placate her. 'Zoe, there are some things I must explain to you -

b **both** of you.'

Jamie had retreated to the cloister room. The Doctor had visited this place

whenever

he needed somewhere to think, and Jamie could see why. It was so

peaceful here, away from all the uncertainty and hurt he was experiencing. But **yen**

child

here, Jamie could not rest. Sitting on a bare stone bench he felt like a lost

as though no one wanted him anymore.

'

Jamie?' He heard Zoe's voice, but in his sorrow he could not bring himself to **look at** her. 'Jamie, Vorac wants to see you - well, both of us.'

Still he would not face her. 'He's alive, then?'

'**Yes.**' He caught the hesitant note in her voice. Will you come?'

He turned to look at her. The redness in her eyes and the slight puffiness in her **Ike told** him she had been crying. 'I... I'm not sure, Zoe.'

'**Please.**' She slowly approached, reaching out a hand to him.

'**I'm still** not sure why you want me here.'

'**You** are here, Jamie. That is the important thing.' Vorac was now in better **spirits,** though he had not yet fully recovered. 'I seem to have been the cause of **some** friction between you and Zoe. That was never my intention, and I can only **offer my** sincere regret for any hurt for which I may have been responsible.'

He paused while they took this in, and then continued. 'You both care for each **other,** that much is clear. My presence here almost destroyed that friendship,

&Id 1 apologise for that. I only hope that the hurt that lies between you can be **boded.**'

Jamie and Zoe looked at Vorac, then at each other. He could see that they would

seed time to sort out their feelings, but for Vorac time was not a

luxury he could **afford.**

Was

'Jamie, when I collapsed earlier, it was through no fault of yours.' Jamie

about to protest, but Vorac pressed on. 'The vortex drained much of

ow strength, but your time vessel has certain restorative properties which offered

•**recovery** of sorts. However, its quiet surroundings are something I am unused **Ow**'

Jamie at last found his voice. 'Like a fish out of water...' he said. 'So the TARDIS

Is as strange to you as your life would be to us.'

'Precisely. And it is that strangeness that weakens me, as you witnessed earlier.

Unless I can somehow return to my own environment in the time winds, I shall

grow steadily weaker, until I have no strength left.' Vorac looked to Jamie and Zoe.

Ì must return. Will you help me?'

Jamie and Zoe moved to the power room to consider Vorac's request. There was

still a tension between them, but Vorac's words had at least got them talking.

Ì don't see what we can do,' Zoe said. 'We're hardly equipped for something

like this.'

Jamie was deep in thought. 'Maybe so, but we can't just do nothing:'

Zoe looked at him in surprise. 'Well, you've certainly changed your

tune,' she

remarked. 'Just a few minutes ago you were ready to talk with your fists.'

Jamie could see she had regretted her words the moment she'd said them. But

he couldn't blame her for his mistakes.

`Look, maybe I was wrong about him,' he conceded, 'but that's not important

now. If Vorac can't survive here, then we have to try to help him, somehow. He's

relying on us, and I can't see how we can let him down.'

`Jamie, you said it yourself— we can't fly the TARDIS. Even if we could, how are

we supposed to return Vorac to his people?'

`Zoe, Vorac is like us; he's a traveller in time and space, and separated from

those who know him. We know what that's like, don't we?' He had touched a raw

nerve there. He knew Zoe had left family and friends behind, just as he had done

back in Culloden. 'We made our choice. Now look at Vorac — be has the same kind

of life, but that's been taken away from him.' Jamie was now certain in his beliefs.

`Zoe, we have to help him get back out there.'

`You really believe we can, don't you?' She sighed and gave in. 'All right, Jamie,

you win. But where do we start?'

Àh, well, I've been thinking about that.'

`Vorac, can you tell us about these time winds?' asked Jamie, now back in the

control room. 'These undercurrents and everything?'

`They are prevalent throughout the vortex,' he explained. Tor the most part, we

can ride over or around them.'

`Yes, but what are they?' Zoe prompted. 'What do they do?'

Vorac was surprised at the question. 'But you travel the vortex yourselves. Surely

you have experienced such undercurrents?'

Àye, but we've never seen them,' Jamie replied. 'Inside the TARDIS we're safe

from what goes on outside.'

`But you've seen what we don't see,' Zoe said. 'You've had first-hand

experience.'

`The vortex sometimes runs in tandem with the time winds,' said Vorac.

Òccasionally there is a collision, resulting in minute tears within the vortex wall.

Usually the vortex repairs itself immediately, but these tears can expand, creating the undercurrents and the pockets we spoke of, before the vortex heals itself.'

Jamie nodded. 'So what we need to do is make another tear, big enough for you

to pass through.'

'**It's** just matter of putting it into practice,' Zoe added. Vorac got the feeling that **That** was for Jamie's benefit as well as his.

'**So** you can help me?' he asked them hopefully.

Jamie nodded. 'We'll do what we can.'

Jamie

cupboards

had spent the last half-hour searching through numerous storage

. He'd said that he knew what he was looking for, but it had been so

king since they had last been needed, he wasn't exactly sure where they were kept.

Zoe, meanwhile, was trying to talk him out of this wild plan he had just explained

6 her. 'How did you ever think up such an outrageous idea?'

'**Well,** it was something you said yourself, when we were looking for the Doctor

— about how he couldn't just walk out of the TARDIS while it was in flight.'

Zoe was stunned. 'Oh, no. Do you mean to say this madcap scheme is all my

doing?'

It Jamie tried to reassure her. 'Look, if you can do your part, then I'll feel a lot **happier** while I'm doing mine.'

to She wasn't convinced, but once Jamie had got an idea in his head, there was no **it**

it. 'Look, I'll admit that it's possible — theoretically. But you could be torn

*art out there.'

'I'll not be on my own — Vorac understands the vortex and these time winds.

tether, we'll be all right. All you have to do is fly the TARDIS.'

Zoe sighed, defeated, and returned to her own task. The Doctor had showed her **TARDIS** manual once or twice, but this was the first time

Zoe had ever scanned **b**

capable

pages. Though she had a basic understanding of the ship and what it was

of, she had never before been put in charge of the controls. As such, there

were a few things she needed to brush up on ifJamie's outlandish plan was to have dm slightest chance of succeeding.

At last, Jamie emerged with the spacesuits that, he explained, he and the Doctor **had worn** when they once walked on the surface of the Moon. Zoe checked the

Wu over, making sure there was no damage to the lining, while Jamie looked at **6e manual.** The Doctor had taught him to read, but Zoe could see this was far **Wand him.**

Ì can't make head nor tail of that book,' he said.

It makes a kind of sense,' Zoe assured him, trying to sound positive, but in her

taut she was still sceptical. 'Jamie, are you sure about this?'

a '**No,**' he finally admitted. 'But unless you've a better idea, there's nothing else **can do.**'

s"**au** and Jamie were waiting by the main doors, both wearing identical

pacesuits

. Zoe had also donned a spacesuit — just in case — and was making final

on their air supply, while Jamie spooled out long coils of thick, sturdy rope.

A '**Jamie,** you do not need to do this,' Vorac assured him.

'**Yes,** I do,' he declared. 'You're in a mess, and we'll do anything we can to put it **eight.**' He also felt he needed to make amends for his earlier behaviour.

'I am not sure I need this helmet,' Vorac said. 'I don't usually breathe air.'

`Perhaps not,' Zoe answered. 'Rut the microphone relay set into it will allow us

all to keep in contact.'

Vorac nodded and then lowered the helmet over his head, locking it into place.

Jamie had already done the same. Nodding to Zoe, he could see that she was

now more assured at the console. She activated the force field, then operated the

switch to open the main doors.

As before, time winds buffeted the outer shell of the TARDIS, and Jamie could

feel the ship shudder in their wake. He and Vorac edged outside, and the doors

closed behind them.

As Jamie quickly passed coils of rope to Vorac, he thought back to what he'd said

to Zoe just a few minutes before: 'Unless you've a better idea, there's nothing else we can do.' Now there was no going back.

Keeping close to the exterior, Vorac and Jamie secured the rope tightly around

the four sides of the TARDIS, before slowly climbing up onto the roof and looping

the ends around the sides and across the top. Jamie gave a couple of experimental

tugs to ensure the knots were secure, before he and Vorac wrapped the last few feet of rope around their wrists. Positioned on the roof they were, to all intents and

purposes, riding the TARDIS like a sledge, the vortex blowing around them. Now

they were ready for the next stage.

Àll right, Zoe,' Jamie called out. 'It's up to you now.'

The sound of Zoe's voice came though loud and clear on the microphone relay.

`Stand by - force field off... now!'

Jamie had thought himself ready, but nothing could have prepared him for the

sudden strain on his muscles as the full force of the vortex tore through his body.

For a moment he almost blacked out, then he felt Vorac's arm around his

shoulders, shaking him, willing him back to consciousness Finally, he gave a

brief smile, which Vorac returned.

His head clear, Jamie spoke to Zoe. 'This is it then. Whenever you're ready.'

Zoe was grateful for her prowess in speed reading. That, and her photographic

memory, had allowed her to take in so much from the TARDIS manual in a

relatively short period of time. The operations of the main controls were now

mostly clear to her, enabling her to fly the TARDIS with more confidence. Even so,

it had only been in the last few moments that she had come across a possible

solution to the problem in hand. 'When two TARDISes attempt to occupy the same

point in space and time,' she had read, 'this anomaly is commonly referred to as a

"time ram".' From an initial idea, Zoe could see a possible adaptation of the original premise - and a possible theory, which had a chance of success. Now the

time had come to put theory into practice.

`Hang on tight, both of you,' she warned over the microphone relay, as she set

the controls for a dangerous manoeuvre. She was about to attempt a time ram -

however, rather than two TARDISes, she was using the TARDIS and the vortex

itself.

If successful, the result should be the same: a tear in space and time.

* * *

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Vorac and Jamie held their balance — and their nerve — as the TARDIS veered off to **the** right, slamming into the winds and currents of the vortex. It was like being **thrown** into a solid wall, but with an added unpleasant rippling effect.

'Whew! And that was only the first try,' gasped **Jamie.**

'**This** would have been much safer from inside your vessel,' Vorac pointed out.

'Maybe so. But out here, you're that much closer to any tear that might open **up.**

You said yourself that they can close in a second.' His teeth rattled as the TARDIS

dammed again into the vortex. 'And it needed both of us out here to tie the rope.'

'**I** can find no fault in your argument, Jamie,' Vorac observed, as a

third collision **Into the** vortex almost threw the two of them off balance. He smiled at Jamie. 'Not **that** this is the best time for debate.'

'I'll not argue with you there.' Then, almost too late, he saw it. 'Look out!'

instinctively Coming straight towards them was a swirling mass of energy. Vorac

ducked at the warning, but Jamie himself was too slow, as the energy **mass** struck him hard across his chest, the impact causing the mass to fade **and dissipate-Jamie's whole body went numb. He could hardly feel his hand gripping the**

lope, but then *he* realised why — **the force of the impact had torn his hand free, and be could see the vortex spinning around him as he fell away from the TARDIS.**

'Jamie!' He heard Zoe's voice over the relay. He tried to call out, but no sound would come.

He had come so far. Now it was all for nothing. And Jamie had never really had

the

endangered

chance to apologise for his reckless actions. Actions that might have

them all.

The distance between himself and the TARDIS became greater, until it was

Afloat out of his sight. Then something took hold of him. A subtle grip around

his body, but firm nonetheless. 'I have you now, Jamie. Are you all right?'

He forced the words out. 'Am I dreaming?'

Then he recognised the Time Rider's voice. 'It is no dream, Jamie. How does it

Seel to ride the time vortex?'

He looked down, then wished he hadn't. 'I think I'll answer that when I'm on

Arm ground.' Speaking was coming easier, but Jamie's whole body ached. What

kept him focused was something in the distance. At first he couldn't identify it, but as they drew closer he recognised the familiar shape.

Vorac answered the unspoken question. 'Yes, my friend. It is the TARDIS.'

In what seemed a matter of seconds — Jamie wondered if you can measure the

passing of time in the vortex — they were back atop the roof of the ship, holding tight to the rope. Though his body still ached, Jamie was now physically and

mentally alert. He turned to Vorac, any lingering doubts about the Time Rider now forgotten. 'You saved my life. I'm grateful.'

Ìt is as you said before,' he replied. 'Friends look out for each other.'

Jamie remembered, and clasped his hand in Vorac's, initiating a handshake.

After a moment's uncertainty, the gesture was returned.

Then Jamie saw something: the TARDIS was now drifting, and, up above, there

seemed to be an anomaly in the vortex. `Vorac?' Jamie whispered hopefully. He

turned to his friend, only to find him gone, the spacesuit tied to one end of the

rope. Looking back to the anomaly, Jamie could swear he saw a streak of light

racing through the tear in the vortex, passing through just before it healed itself.

`Jamie Vorac? What's happened?' Zoe's voice echoed inside his helmet.

Jamie could only stare at the rapidly diminishing tear in awe and amazement,

knowing that they had achieved the near impossible, and that Vorac was back

where he belonged. 'We did it, Zoe,' was all he could answer. 'We did it.'

`Well, I still think it was a stupid thing to do.'

Òch, Zoe. Will you no' give it a rest.' He couldn't believe she was still

complaining. It had been some time since he had gingerly climbed down from the

TARDIS, carrying Vorac's empty spacesuit. Once inside the ship, he had quickly

removed his own suit and left Zoe to return everything to the storage cupboard.

For all his bravado and assurances, he knew that Zoe's scathing comments

about what a mad idea it had been were right — it had been a foolish, if successful, venture. Thankfully his aches and pains were lessening, but they were nothing

compared to what had almost happened to him in the vortex. Had it not been for

Vorac's quick thinking, Jamie might have been lost forever. And he was glad to

have made his peace with the Time Rider before his swift departure. Jamie had

been in some close calls before, but this had been too close. He shivered — to have come so close to death made one appreciate life all the more.

Zoe was proud of Jamie, and his idea, although dangerous, had been the only

logical choice. And she had learned much. Jamie's bravery had never been in

question, but her estimation of him had gone up tenfold. She could also see that

his earlier outbursts against Vorac were understandable, given the circumstances

— perhaps she might have reacted in the same way. As Zoe rejoined Jamie back in

the control room, the two of them smiled at each other. They were friends again,

and shared experiences, it seemed, counted for a lot.

Àh, there you are.' They turned at the sound of that voice. It seemed to come out

of thin air. Then he slowly appeared from nowhere: the Doctor, in his baggy coat

and shabby trousers, with that mop of dark hair, regarding his two friends

curiously. 'What are you two doing up at this hour? Well, what's the matter?

Anyone would think you were looking at a ghost.'

Jamie was the first to find his voice. 'Hey, you're a fine one to talk. Where did you disappear to?'

`Yes, we've been worried sick,' Zoe said.

Òh, have you?' They both nodded. 'Well, there was really nothing for you to

worry about,' the Doctor insisted.

Àye, that's all very well. But while you've been off gadding about, we've had an

— ouch!' Jamie reacted to a sharp kick to his shin, and glared at Zoe.

`Jamie means that we've been stuck here, with nothing to do,' she explained,

silencing the Scot. *'We've* been left wondering when, or even if, you were coming back.'

Òh, is that all?' The Doctor chuckled and gave them an indulgent smile. 'Well,

I think my little jaunt is over now, so we can all get back to normal.' He frowned

as he studied the console. 'Have either of you been touching the controls?'

'Of course not, Doctor.'

'As if we would.'

He looked at them both, their faces pictures of innocence. The Doctor knew that **his** disappearance may not have gone unnoticed. While he hadn't been held as a prisoner as such, his brief time in the company of the Time Riders had triggered a

memory from the teachings at the Academy...

For the Code of the Time Riders is dear — should one of their kind ***be*** lost, an ***Exchange*** must **be *made*** to maintain a ***balance*** of sorts, until such a time that the balance can be corrected...

It had been just the Doctor's luck to be plucked from the TARDIS at that fateful **moment,** with no chance to warn Jamie or Zoe.

And now, having been safely returned to them, knowing full well that his two

friends had been visited by a rider of the time winds, the Doctor was still none the **wiser as** to what mischief they had got up to in his absence. The Time Rider he'd **briefly**

no

met had revealed nothing; that was the trouble with an enigmatic

species —

conversation. And now Jamie and Zoe remained unusually quiet.

M the sound of materialisation filled the room, the Doctor busied himself at the **controls,** allowing the youngsters a hastily whispered conversation.

'Don't you think we should tell him?' said Jamie.

'Why bother? He need never know.'

'Aye, I suppose... Och, I'm away back to bed.'

'Ahem!' They looked to the Doctor, who was pointing beyond the now open

doors. Outside, a new day was dawning on an alien world. But it was at the edge **of the** main doors that the Doctor was pointing — where thick coils of rope were still firmly secured around the TARDIS's exterior. 'Would anyone care to explain

this?'

47

05.00

The Five O'Clock Shadow

Nev Fountain

!live o'clock. Again.

He came with a glass of warm milk and placed it by the bed. He slid the small **chair** towards him, wincing as he sat down.

'Now,' he said. 'Once...' Well... Not quite...

It wasn't 'Once upon a time', that's for sure.

He wasn't prepared to be walked over any more.

Many urged wait, tried to make him stay,

But time waits for no man, that's what they say.

He scarpered with lost moments to spare,

An hour wasted here, a precious minute there.

He pushed his way out between tick and tock,

A bad time born on the wrong side of the clock.

But let's change a tack, and jump a thread,

And find the hero of this tale instead.

Let's peer into our astral map,

And find our favourite Time Lord chap.

There he is, look! There's the Doc!

Flapping around in his coat of frock!

Silk scarf behind him, nose in front,

Clever chap, you know, not your average grunt.

Over his shoulder, to one side and behind him,

We take great pleasure in finding

A loyal companion, pretty and pert

With bright eyes, shining wide and alert.

A mysterious couple, a very odd pair —

Just what is going on in there?

Was it true, or had he just taught her

To think of herself as his granddaughter?

You may think that there I did digress

For irrelevant tittle-tattle, but nonetheless...

At this stage, I think it pertinent to alert ya

To the thorny question of nature v nurture.

His TARDIS, like a stallion, bounded over fences,

Thundered over past and future tenses,

All the while keeping a firm maternal grip

On the present participles inside the ship.

Box and occupants shuffled through dimensions,

Going through their usual declinations.

He frowned, she puzzled, he flicked a switch,

He/she/it

noticed there was a glitch.

It was five o'clock, by her wrist chronometer,

When she felt the time machine start to teeter,

Like a car going over a bump in the road,

The TARDIS jumped,

Wobbled...

... and slowed.

Something was wrong. In fact, Susan saw

It was bigger than any wrongness she'd viewed,

This wrongness was wronger than ever befoe ,

Several degrees north of the usual wrongitude.

She began to ask, but with mouth tight-lipped,

He said, 'Wait, Susan, save questions for later...'

And with chin jutted out, and lapels gripped,

He hurried over to the fault locator.

`There's nothing wrong,' he grimly said.

`What?' The answer nearly floored her:

`Nothing *inside* the ship, I'm afraid,'

And patted the shoulder of his granddaughter.

`We've run out of road — that's what's occurred,

`That's the cause of our journey's interruption.

`But it's not a path meant for the common herd,

Ìt's time here that's currently under construction.'

`With no time to run on,' the Doctor sighed,

`We're stuck here for the duration.

Ìt isn't something we can pop out to buy

Àt any reputable service station.'

52

Meanwhile...

It was at this point, o gentle reader,

The Five O'Clock Shadow, for it was he,

Realised at once, that clever bleeder,

That this was a happy opportunity.

The Five-am Shadow, trapped in his cell,

Of moments and hours, minutes and seconds,

Felt the bars of his prison slowly dispel,

And lo and behold, his freedom did beckon.

With time being scarce in this neighbourhood

I thought at this point important to mention,

That he got going when the going was good —

Not relevant yet, but it adds to the tension.

The Doctor smiled, and Susan could tell

That his noggin had formed a notion.

`The power of ideas can work just as well

'To give the TARDIS some locomotion!'

And into the telepathic circuits he thought

E equals MC squared, I think therefore I am,

Every concept he'd heard, every story he'd caught,

From the value of pi to green eggs and ham.

`Binary codes, number nodes, the ratio of gears,

`Call me Ishmael, to be or not to be,

Ìf we throw in enough types of ideas

`We can work up an escape philosophy!'

The TARDIS was moving but not enough,

The mighty engines protested and quaked.

They'd filled them with the wrong kind of guff,

With rubbish ideas that were mostly half-baked.

The TARDIS started to tire,

Its motors half-cocked.

Their situation dire;

It was still five o'clock.

`We've run out of time...'

His face was glum.

`There is no more timèFor us to run.'

The seconds

Grew slim,

She looked

To him,

He said,

Ì fear

The

Dead

End

Is

N

e

a

r.'

Five o'clock,

Five o'clock,

It chimed it again.

Five o'clock,

Five o'clock,

That impossible ***when.***

Five o'clock,

Five o'clock,

That never ends.

Eventually...

Things began to assume

Their usual normality,

And normal service did resume

In all departments of reality.

The Doctor mopped his sticky brow,

Took a hankie, coughed and spluttered.

Òf all the wheezes up till now,

`That's the best I've ever uttered '

Unfortunately this was the second thing

That helped the Shadow to fruition.

The Doctor's plan used the power of ideas,

And the dark side of ideas... is superstition.

Susan's eyes bulged to a goggled stare.

She saw a thing that completely psyched her.

`Before we relax, I think it only fair

'To tell you that we have a hitch-hiker.'

He howled with freedom of one long-stored,

And, with a voice described as pretty near

To fingers lingering down a blackboard,

He screeched out loud for all to hear...

`Look out for *the Five* O'Clock Shadow!

`You may nudge, you may giggle and mock,

`But I'm not a nice time to have, as how

'I was born the wrong side of the clock.

'I dwell between the dark and the day,

Between the inky blackness and the dawn in

`That shadowy time where I like to play

Ànd dance around, before the morning

`Flaps its wings and makes night terrors flee,

`But the feelings stay, because they are me.'

`Five am's too early to rise and shine in.

`Wakefulness in sensitive souls is rife...

'Too late to find another dream to climb in,

'They're haunted by dark moments of life.'

'As night starts to tire and dull,

'I pluck and play with wakeful brains,

'Like a kitten with a ball of wool

'Driving those poor mortals in-skein.'

After he callously delivered

That cruel and abominable pun,

He danced and he gibbered

Around the room, and then some.

Here and there and all around,

And then again, that terrible sound...

55

Tor every son who buries his mum,

And stands unblinking over the plot.

Tor every parent dry-eyed and dumb

`Standing broken over an empty cot,

Ì am grief deferred, hidden from healing,

`Sadness squirrelled, screwed tight down.

The ugly, struggling, squealing feelings

`That we try to smother, try to drown.

`The chained and manacled melancholy,

`The days kept aside for a rain-soaked brolly.'

The Doctor looked underwhelmed — oh, yes,

It was definitely whelm that he was under.

`That may be,' he said, tut I must confess

Ì' m mystified as to why you, like thunder,

`Have boomed, growled, and bored us silly

`With your lengthy and tedious lecture

Àbout what and who you are, and will be,

`Your whole yawn-inducing raison d'etre.

`Leave us, creature, loud and charmless,

`There's nothing you can do to harm us.'

`Me harm you? A laugh. A finger uncoiled

Showing a knuckle large and bony,

Revealing a fingernail black and soiled,

And he pointed, his glare long and stony,

At the Doctor standing grim and passive.

`You've hidden away from life for an age.

Ìt's your fault I've grown fat and massive.

`You've avoided sadness, grief and rage.

`Why should I try to cause you angst?

Ì live, and it's to you I owe my thanks!'

`You've not felt what the wounded feel,

`Seen what the lost and depressed see.

`You've kept the tin hat on the air-tight seal,

Àn̈d tiptoed over life's rich tapestry...'

Susan looked askance and aghast.

`What does he mean?' she puzzled.

`That you keep foul feelings fast...

`How can you keep tragedy muzzled?'

56

The lights inside the ship seemed to dim

As if it knew there was bad news to impart.

A shadow would have fallen cross him

Were he not already a shadow. So, to start:

`Friends and family must eventually die,

`Companions have to take their leave —

'These are the things that allow us to cry,

`These are the moments when we grieve.

`How can he ever allow himself to feel

`When those around him aren't even real?'

`Yes indeed, Susan, you heard me right,'

The shadow continued his oration,

`You're a subroutine, a computer sprite,

À mathematical computation.

`The TARDIS conceived you in the plural

Ànd birthed companions by the million.

Ìt even once gave itself a double epidural

Ànd came up with grandkids John and Gillian.

Ìf you fall in love, die or go home to mother,

`The Doctor shrugs and grows another.'

Susan asked, 'Is this true?

`That I'm a storybook fictional creation?

`Like him, do I exist because of you?

Àm I a figment of your imagination?'

The Doctor, with infinite sadness dawning,

Said, 'It is the case, I am afraid,

`That to avoid any unpleasant mourning

Ì had you, and a thousand others, made.'

Ànd now,' the Shadow said, 'I have form and sense!

`This stupid fool thought me locked away,

`But a handy combination of recent events,

`Means that I can run and play!'

But then a twist curled around the tale...

Despite a bombshell that should have shattered

The sunny demeanour of a nightingale,

The Doctor chuckled as if it barely mattered.

57

Susan joined the side of her granddad,

Mysteriously recovering her composure.

He said, 'We might have something to add,

`That'll bring this matter to some closure.'

Ì' m sorry to string you along, my old foe,

`To cruelly dangle the keys to your cell

Ìn front of your eager and jagged nose,

`But I have a few surprises as well...'

`Suzy's not real, you know that much,

`But here's the truth, so obvious that you'll

`Kick yourself at being so out of touch:

Ì, too, you see, am not remotely factual...'

As the Doctor imparted this clever racket,

His grey moustache twitched under his nose,

He gripped the lapels of his brown jacket

And assumed his customary bow-legged pose.

The melancholy spirit's brain started to hurt.

Didn't the Doctor just call her 'Suzy'?

He saw the eight-year-old girl in the tartan skirt,

And suddenly he...

Came over...

... all woozy.

Ì'm the Doctor who was specially created

`To be twinkly, cuddly and uncomplicated.

Ì can betray everyone, sabotage a fluid link,

Ànd laugh it off with an ostentatious wink.'

`There's no fear to exploit, doubt or shame,

`No self-hatred, darkness, guilt or blame.

'I' m happy, shallow, kindly and bright.

`There's nothing to keep me awake at night.'

`The real Doctor, worried about his mental health,

Àware you were nibbling at his thoughts by stealth,

`He knew you'd be making tracks inwardly,

Ànd so he constructed this clever facsimile.'

Ìf there was ever a point that you were ablèTo escape and threaten to turn things unstable,

`We were a trap, I'm afraid, to keep you at bay,

`While he gently pilots us out of harm's way.'

And as he faded, blurred and dwindled,

The Shadow knew that he'd been swindled.

He shook a gnarly fist in the air,

Towards the Doctor who wasn't there.

Ì won't go away, Doctor, do you hear me?

`Soon you'll have more reason to fear me.

Ùnless you engage with the trials of life,

Ì will grow bigger and then there'll be strife!'

`You have to face it, you so-called rebel,

Ì won't be kept hidden under a pebble.

`Things have to change for better or worse

'Or you'll be forever under my curse!'

And the TARDIS, in its temporal grace,

Sped off to another place,

Another time, another season,

Another location without rhyme or reason.

A place where different rules apply, where things don't head from bad to verse.

Where the clocks don't read five o'clock...

He closed the book at ten past five. The child was back to sleep. She always woke

at this time. So did he, in fact.

She never asked the question. But then — would you? What would you dread

more? Not having life? Or living, and knowing that life brings change?

And somewhere in the bowels of somewhen,

The five o'clock chuckle started again.

05.10

The Sooner the Better

Ian Farrington

`This is not where we should be,' said Leela as she stepped out of the TARDIS.

`Why do you say that?' came the Doctor's muffled reply from inside the ship.

`Show me your working!'

Ìt is too quiet.' Leela looked around at her surroundings. They were in some

kind of village on a hillside and, above the houses further down the slope, she

could see miles of countryside. The houses were uniform in many ways — same

design, similar size, a small ornamental garden between its front entrance and the

road — yet each one was distinctive in some way, as if its owner had felt the need to embellish it, mark it out as individual. One had a differently coloured door,

another's garden was overgrown and wild. This was a peculiar tribe.

The Doctor stepped outside and gently clicked the TARDIS's door closed. 'No,

it's the right place,' he said, 'but we're a little early. It's only just dawn.'

`You said we were to find this man in what did you call it? Suburbia?'

`Yes.' The Doctor smiled. 'And here we are. But, as I say, they're all still in bed.

Let's explore.'

The pair followed the road down the hill. It was a bracing morning. The air was

fresh and cool, the sun just visible behind hazy cloud. It would be a warm day. The early morning chorus of birdsong had begun, but that was the only sound. After a

mile or so, they reached the foot of the hill. By the side of the road was a stone

pillar — some sort of tribute to the dead, Leela supposed.

The Doctor sat down on a wooden bench next to the pillar, dramatically

sweeping up his scarf and folding it several times upon his lap.

Leela sat next to him. 'Why are we waiting?' she said. 'Why not rouse this man?

I do not think he will object to being woken if, as you say, he has been waiting for your message. You said it was important'

The Doctor took an envelope out from his inside pocket and turned it over

absent-mindedly in his hands. 'It is important, Leela. I made a promise many years

ago that I would bring him this —' he held up the envelope '— once I had it myself.

But he has a life here. We can't just barge in —'

'Is that not what you usually do?' Leela had, if nothing else, learnt how to tease

the Doctor.

`We can't just barge in,' he repeated with a look that told Leela he was not

amused. 'I made a promise I intend to keep.'

`Well, how long do you intend us to wait?'

The Doctor took a fob watch from another pocket and flipped open the lid. 'It's

only just half past five in the morning. A couple of hours or so, I should think.'

Leela stood up. Ìf that is the case, we could go back to the TARDIS rather than

sitting here. Idle.'

`Go inside? On a lovely morning like this?' The Doctor jumped to his feet. 'Oh,

if you insist.' And with that, he strode off back up the hill towards the TARDIS.

Leela smiled ruefully and followed him.

Paul took off his stereo headphones. They were the kind that had a metal bar that

went over the top of your head, and black foam pads that sat on your ears. Like the kind Marty McFly had, he thought. He let them hang around his neck, just like

Marty. He was also wearing a T-shirt, a checked shirt, a denim jacket, a body

warmer, jeans and trainers — just like Marty.

Why am I doing this? he thought. He knew it was stupid, aping a character in a

film, even if he had watched that film five times since it came out on DVD. Last

week. Is that something to worry about?

His CD player's batteries had run down. No listening to music whilst he did his

paper round, then. He'd have to do the entire route with nothing to keep his mind

occupied. A whole hour! Paul heaved his bag's strap up onto his shoulder. An

average weekday's worth of newspapers: 42 Daily Mirrors, 17 Suns, eight Daily

Mails, three *Independents* and a copy of the *Financial Times* for the posh bloke on Linden Close.

`See you,' he shouted to Mrs Anderson, the newsagent.

`Goodbye, dear!'

Paul's route was a fairly straightforward one: along Church Street, as far as the

memorial bench; then up Elm Tree Avenue, taking in its tributary culs-de-sac and

closes. After delivering his final newspaper, a Mirror to number 114, he'd double

back down the hill, go home, have his breakfast and get changed for school.

Being a Tuesday, he'd have to leave again at around 7.30am . John Flamsteed

Secondary School was about two miles away; Paul and a group of his friends

always met up beforehand in the village to walk there together.

Paul sometimes saw the occasional person on his round, someone walking

their dog, perhaps, or a jogger, but he usually had this early morning hour to

himself. The other week, he'd actually realised that whilst he was walking along

he was singing Huey Lewis's *The Power of Love* to himself. He'd wondered how long he'd been doing that.

Church Street was simple enough, just four stops. As he turned on to Elm Tree

Avenue, lost in his thoughts, Paul bumped into the back of someone and knocked

them to the ground.

Òh, I'm so sorry.'

It was a postman. 'That's okay,' he said, slightly disingenuously. `No harm

done.' paul helped him to his feet and picked up his bag for him. It was light —

email has a lot to answer for, he thought.

Às long as you're all right...'

The postman smiled. 'Yes, I'm fine.' It was clear from the way he was hobbling

that he wasn't. 'Yes, well, perhaps I'd better sit down for a moment.'

Paul helped him to the nearby bench and sat him down. He was wearing a

postman's summer outfit, which included shorts, and his knee had been badly

scraped along the pavement.

'I'll be okay,' he said, wincing. 'I'll see to it when I get home.'

'As long as you do. I once heard of someone falling over in the playground of my

school and the scar went gangrenous and -'

'Yes,' said the postman, cutting him off. 'Well, I don't think that'll happen this

time.' He slowly got to his feet and ruffled Paul's hair. 'Thank you for your help, young man.'

Patronising ponce, thought Paul. I'm 15, for pity's sake.

As he watched him walk away, Paul wondered what had happened to Bill, the

usual postman. A day off? Paul didn't think Old Bill had days off. Just as he made

to pick up his bag of newspapers, Paul saw something lying on the ground next to

it: a letter.

'Wait!' he called as he jogged to catch the postman up. 'You've dropped one.' It

was only as he passed him the envelope that Paul looked at it properly for the first time. The paper was a creamy beige, rough to the touch, and the flap was sealed -

literally, with a red, waxy imprint that had an elaborate design. The stamp wasn't

British, and the writing was peculiar-

'Thank you,' said the postman as he snatched the envelope from Paul's hand.

When they were about halfway back to the TARDIS, the Doctor stopped and sat

down on a bank of grass that ran alongside the road. `See over there? Number 89?'

He pointed to a house opposite them. 'That's where Walter lives.'

'The man you helped escape from prison?'

'That makes it sound like he was a criminal, Leela. He was a great man - is a **great man. He fell foul of circumstance, that's all, and I was there to help.'**

'What is it you are delivering to him?' **asked Leela.**

'His -' The Doctor suddenly bolted upright, patting his coat frantically. 'The envelope? What have you done with it?' He turned sharply, stepping towards her.

Even though this was her friend, Leela reacted instinctively. She took a step back, **raising her arms slightly.**

'I did not have it, Doctor,' she said firmly.

The Doctor stared at Leela, his eyes burrowing into hers and holding her gaze.

His stem expression then suddenly broke into a soft grin. 'No, you didn't have it, did you? I had it in my pocket.'

Ànd it is not there now?'

'Evidently.' He took off his hat and wiped his brow. 'I think I must have left it on that bench we stopped at.'

As quickly as **he had marched up the hill, the Doctor marched back down again with Leela keeping as close as she could. There were now the occasional signs of life in** the village. **They passed two men on their way back to the bench: the first had a bad cut on his knee, Leela spotted; the second, carrying a bright orange bag and walking up a path** towards one of the houses, was no more than a child.

As they approached the bench, Leela saw that there was no sign of any envelope.

Even so, the Doctor raced about, circling the area, looking everywhere he could

think of- literally overturning stones at times - in a frantic search.

'It is not here,' Leela said.

Ìt must be,' he snapped. 'You saw me: I had it when we were sitting here.'

Leela tried to remember. She'd seen the Doctor take the envelope from his

pocket, he'd had it in his hands as they'd talked. She couldn't, however, visualise what had happened after that. Had he simply left it on the bench, or had he

returned it to a pocket and it had dropped out afterwards?

Leela didn't actually know what was in the envelope. The Doctor had been very

cagey about what he was up to. 'Don't mind a quick jaunt to suburbia, do you?' he

had said. 'I have an errand to run.' Leela had had no objection, of course, but had been unable to find out exactly what the errand was. It involved delivering

something — an envelope, it now seemed — to a man called Walter that the Doctor

had once rescued from an alien prison. He'd then helped this Walter start a new

life on Earth. 'A kind of intergalactic witness-protection programme,' the Doctor

had said. On Leela's world it had been much simpler — if someone needed

protection, you killed their enemies for them. Then they did not need protection

any longer. At times, she felt the Doctor could learn from her.

Now the envelope was lost, he was clearly very worried. 'I've let him down,

Leela,' he said. 'It's all my fault. It was in my hands and I've let it go.'

Eleven Elm Tree Avenue: a Daily Mail and an Independent. A schizophrenic

household, Paul thought, as he scored number II off his master sheet with a Biro.

According to the sheet, next was number 17. He didn't actually need to check the

sheet after each house. He'd been doing this round for two years now and the

details had only changed twice in that time — when Mrs Batley died

and stopped

taking the Tel

and then a few weeks ago when a new couple moved in to

Church Street. But he always felt the need to double-check. 'You get that from your Granny Deirdre,' his mum would say.

`Hullo there!'

Paul spun around, taken by surprise for the second time in ten minutes. Two

people were running up the hill towards him. The man who'd shouted at him was

tall and dressed in a long, flapping coat. A long scarf flowed around him as he ran, and with one hand he held a hat to his head. He was with a good-looking woman

dressed like someone from the cover of a Dungeons ***and*** Dragons book.

Èrm...' said Paul. 'Hello.'

Ì was wondering whether you'd be so kind and give us some assistance,' said

the man as he caught up with Paul. 'Have you been anywhere near the bench at the

foot of the hill today?'

`Yes, about ten minutes ago. Why?'

`Why?' The man looked put out, as if Paul should instinctively know what he

was talking about. 'A man's future hangs in the balance and you ask me why?'

`What...?'

The woman stepped forward, in between the man and Paul. `Do not pay

attention to my friend, he is... worried.' Her voice was calming, authoritative. Paul liked her instantly. 'Please, when you were at this bench, did you see an envelope.

My friend has lost one and it is very important.'

`Yes, there was a letter. It was odd, the writing was old-fashioned —'

`Marvellous!' said the man. 'That's it!' He smiled for the first time — a confident and completely non-threatening smile. 'Where is it?'

Ì gave it to the postman,' said Paul. 'I assumed he'd know what to do with it.'

The man's smile became fixed, his eyes almost bulging out of his face. 'Then we

must find this postman.'

The woman turned to her friend. 'I saw a man earlier. He had a scar on his knee.

The blood was fresh.'

`That's him,' said Paul. 'He... er, fell over.'

`Thank you very much,' said the man, and he instantly moved off, heading up

the hill with the woman following him.

Paul was slightly dazed: he wasn't used to talking to ***anyone*** at this time in the morning, let alone two oddly dressed nutters with a fixation on a mislaid bit of

post. He noticed that they'd stopped about ten metres away, and were talking.

The man then turned to Paul and called, 'What's your name?'

Èr, Paul.'

`Hello, paul. Do you know this village well?'

Ì've lived here all my life.'

`Good. You wouldn't happen to have any idea where this postman might be

now, would you?'

Paul looked at his watch: six o'clock. Did he have time to help these people out,

and get his paper round finished? One more look at the woman — why don't the

girls I know dress like that, he thought — convinced him that he did. 'Sure,' he

said, walking over to them. 'If he's following the normal route, I reckon we can

catch up with him.'

`Superb,' said the man. 'I'm the Doctor, by the way, and this is Leela.'

Walter Fisher had been up all night. He'd been up all night most nights recently.

He sat in his pyjamas, a cold cup of tea in his hand, watching the day begin.

On his home planet, dawn only happened once a year, followed half a year later

by a sunset that guaranteed darkness for six months. To have lived on Earth, in this quiet, unadventurous, uneventful little Derbyshire village, had given him the

chance to see thousands of sunrises. Each brought a new day, each was beautiful.

He hadn't missed a single one.

Walter looked across his mantlepiece. A carriage clock showed that it had just

gone past six o'clock. To the left was a photograph showing Walter as a younger

man, as he had looked when he first arrived on Earth. He had his arm around

Natalie — when the photograph had been taken, they'd only just met. Walter

studied it, studied his own face. Could he see the future in it? Did the man in the photograph know that he'd spend his entire life here on Earth, that the girl next to **him** would be his wife for more than forty years? Did he know that the Doctor would never return for him?

Yes, thought Walter, I think I did.

He'd had freedom here, he'd had a life. Thanks to the Doctor, he'd escaped the

death camps and persecution, but it had been at a price. He could leave, the Doctor had explained, but perhaps never return. He was exiled.

From that point on, he'd been Walter Fisher, the friendly but distant villager.

His neighbours were pleasant enough, but he *knew* they were unsure about him.

His accent didn't quite fit in, he avoided questions about his past, he didn't drink in the pub or take part in the annual summer fete. It had been easier when Natalie

was around — she knew, she protected him from this world he didn't fully

understand.

Walter went upstairs, to his and Natalie's room. As he walked in, he caught

himself hoping that Natalie would be there.

`So,' said Paul. 'What is it? posted a cheque that'll bounce?'

Ì am sorry, I do not understand,' said Leela. The Doctor was walking slightly

ahead, keeping his eyes peeled for the postman. Leela was alongside Paul as they

followed him.

The letter? I take it it's something the Doc didn't want posting.'

Ìt is something he had to deliver in person,' explained Leela, 'though I do not

know what.' Raising her voice, she added, 'He did not tell me.'

Ì simply didn't get round to it, Leela,' the Doctor said. 'There's no secrecy about it.' He waited for them to catch him up. 'Many years ago, however you wish to

measure it, I —'

He stopped and looked paul in the eye. With the Doctor's attention on him, paul

felt like the centre of the universe or the eye of a storm: thoroughly calm, all the nonsense and fuss and buzz going on around him, not influepcing him. As the

Doctor spoke, paul accepted it completely and unflinchingly as the truth.

`paul, I am what you would call an alien. Leela and I travel through time and

space. Many years ago, I visited a planet which had once been relatively peaceful.

The president was liked by most of his populace, he was a good, honest man.

However, revolution came — swiftly and savagely. The government was overthrown

and a new, less-savoury political machine took over. The president was deposed

and found guilty of some trumped-up charges of treason. The new regime simply

needed him out of the way. He didn't deserve that I was able to help him escape,

but he needed somewhere to hide...'

Paul took a deep breath. `Here...?'

`He's been living at number 8g since 1955. Here, he is known as Walter Fisher.'

Àn alien? Here? The kids at John Flamsteed will never believe this.'

`John Flamsteed would have,' said the Doctor. 'He had an open mind.'

`You know this Flamsteed, Doctor?' asked Leela.

Òf course I do. He was the first Astronomer Royal.' The Doctor began to walk

again. Number 89 was just around the corner.

Ìf this is all true,' said paul, 'why are you back now?'

The revolution failed... eventually. It took many years for normality to return,

but now, thankfully, the president has been granted an official pardon by the *new* government. He can go home. I promised him that I would take him back when it

was safe.'

Paul opened his mouth to speak, but the Doctor raised his hand, cutting him

off. Following his gaze, Paul saw that the front door of number 89 was open.

You two, behind me. Quietly and slowly.' The Doctor stepped into the house,

followed by Leela and Paul. The layout was the same as Paul's home: a small front

hall, a kitchen off to the right, a door ahead that led to the living room. There was **no one on** the ground floor, so the Doctor began to make his way upstairs. Leela followed him, then Paul.

Paul crept as quietly as he could. It felt wrong being in someone else's house,

even if the front door was open. The fact that there was no *one* to be

seen actually made paul creep more slowly. He could feel his heart beat irregularly and realised

he'd been holding his breath

At the top of the stairs, the Doctor stopped short. Standing there was the

postman Paul had bumped into earlier. He startled slightly when he saw the

Doctor.

Ì, er, found the door open,' he said. Ì was worried about the old man.'

As in Paul's house, there were three doors leading off the landing: two

bedrooms, one at the front of the house, one at the back, and a bathroom in

between. The Doctor strode into the front bedroom and then the bathroom,

almost immediately coming out of both. Paul looked into each room after the

Doctor: they were empty.

`Here, then?' the postman said. He tried the back bedroom door. 'It's locked.'

He tried to force it.

`Stand aside,' said the Doctor to Paul, and pushed past him Together with **the**

postman, he shouldered the door, smashing it open.

Leela and Paul followed them in. It was a simple room: a bed, a dressing table,

a wardrobe. The curtains were open, sunlight streaming in almost horizontally,

but the windows were closed, creating a stuffy atmosphere. On the floor, by the

side of the bed, lay an elderly man. He was pale and his eyes were closed. The

Doctor knelt and felt for a pulse. Leela stood over him, then gently placed her hand on the Doctor's shoulder.

Was the man dead? He looked it. Paul had never seen a dead body before. He

didn't know how to react. He didn't feel sick, as he imagined he might in this

situation, but he couldn't look at the body and turned his head away. He saw the postman move slightly away from the door and noticed something behind him.

`Look,' he said. 'He locked himself in.' He pointed at the key, still in its lock.

Paul saw that the Doctor remained knelt down next to the elderly man, his back to the doorway.

`Doctor...' said Leela. `He was old, a natural death was unavoidable. You should not blame yourself.'

`He didn't die naturally, Leela. He's been strangled.'

`That —' said Paul. He cleared his throat and tried again. 'That doesn't make any sense. He'd locked himself in.'

The Doctor went over to the windows and studied each pane and frame. 'He was

murdered.'

Leela moved towards her friend. 'We found him alone, Doctor. There is no one

here. You tell me to believe that nothing is... inexplicable. Your friend must **have died alone if he was locked in this room.'**

Ì'd better, erm, go and call the police,' said the postman.

No,' said the Doctor, turning round.

`Doctor?'

`He should, Leela, but he won't. If that man goes downstairs, we'd never see

him again.'

Paul tried to take everything in, everyone's faces. The Doctor was impassive,

resolute. The postman panicked, and made for the door. Leela dashed across the

room, blocking him inside.

`Do not even try it,' she said, suddenly brandishing a knife.

`Very clever,' said the Doctor. 'You kill Walter, but as you leave you hear us

downstairs. Making it look like Walter had locked himself in, and that you were

simply finding his body, almost worked. Shame the swelling around his neck is so

visible.'

Paul steeled himself and took a close look at the body: purple marks could be

seen around the elderly man's throat. Feeling a dull pain in his stomach, he

steadied himself by leaning against the wall.

`You're too late, the president is dead,' the postman spat out. 'Every mission of

this sort is dangerous. Capture is a tactical risk.' His tone had changed, his whole demeanour; he was now a different person.

`Mission? Tactical risk?' said the Doctor, enraged. 'You're a murderer, plain and

simple.'

Àn assassin,' he corrected. 'This man —' he pointed to the body was a relic,

an anachronistic symbol of weak leadership. He is also a convicted criminal. He

evaded his sentence a generation ago like the coward he is.'

`He's been living here for decades,' said Paul, surprising himself by getting

involved. 'He hasn't hurt anyone — why kill him? Why now?'

`Because he knew,' said the Doctor, 'that I was delivering him this... Leela?'

Knife in one hand, Leela opened up the postman's bag with the other and took

out the envelope Paul had found by the bench. She passed it to the Doctor. He

ripped open its seal and read the enclosed paper in silence.

Ìt's Walter's pardon,' he said after a moment, looking up. 'His ticket home, you

might say.' He stepped closer to the assassin. 'You will pay for your crime. The new government will not take kindly to the cold-blooded murder of a free man.'

Paul shifted slightly, knocking a picture frame from its hook on the wall. It fell

to the floor, causing the Doctor to look round. The assassin took his chance,

swatting Leela's arm aside and dashing past her. The Doctor bolted after him

down the stairs with Leela close behind.

Paul froze. He couldn't explain it, but it seemed wrong to just leave the old man

alone, *even* if he was dead. He could hear fading footsteps outside — Leela and the Doctor giving chase — and after a moment followed them.

Coming out of the front door of number 89, he saw the assassin running up the

hill, the other two close behind. Paul chased after them, the effort of going uphill with a heavy bag of newspapers straining at his knees, at his shoulders, at his

ankles. Even so, he managed to get quite near to them as they approached the top

of Elm Tree Avenue. Leela was sprinting after the assassin, knife in hand, but the

Doctor was actually running off to the right, towards an old-fashioned police

telephone box. When he reached it, he opened its door.

`Here!' he shouted. Leela heard him, and when she caught up with the man she

grabbed him by the shoulders, pulling him back. Showing remarkable strength,

she twisted one of his arms behind him and pushed him towards the Doctor.

He was standing by the door to the box, with his hand doffing the brim of his

hat. With a grunt of effort, Leela pushed the man inside the box and the Doctor

pulled the door shut. 'What? No tip?' he said.

Paul caught them up, panting. He hadn't seen the box before, but his round

didn't take him this far up the hill so maybe it had been there for a while.

Leela looked worried. 'But, Doctor, the controls —'

'Don't worry,' he said, patting the side of the box. 'He's not going anywhere.'

`How did he do it, Doctor?' asked Leela. 'The assassin? Show me his working.'

`Locked room mysteries are always perfectly explicable,' said the Doctor. His

earlier buoyancy had gone, he was now sombre — and unlike Leela and Paul, he

showed no signs of exertion. 'There's no magic involved, no paranormal activity,

no alien influence... Don't assume that because we found something in a locked

room it was locked in...'

Ìt may not have been there when the room was sealed? Your friend was attacked

before the room was locked?'

`You have all the information you need.'

'I still cannot see how the assassin locked the room.' Leela looked indignant.

`You didn't mean the body,' said Paul. 'Did you? You meant the key.'

The Doctor looked at him, a smile forming on his face.

'The postman didn't make it look like the room was locked until we showed up.'

`Go on,' the Doctor said.

'The door wasn't locked when we found your friend — it was the assassin who

told us it was, and he got you to break the door in. Then, when we're not looking,

he puts the key in the lock, making it look like it's been there the whole time. He needed to divert our suspicions so he could leg it.'

`See, Leela,' said the Doctor. 'Perfectly explicable.'

She looked like she was thinking things through. 'It still does not change what

happened. That man is a killer, he should be made to suffer.'

'He will, Leela, just not the way you mean.'

'Yes, Doctor,' she said. 'And I am sorry about your friend.'

`So am I.' The Doctor looked down the hill. Off in the distance, a man in a

business suit was getting into his car. An elderly woman was walking her dog. The

village was coming to life. 'Well, Paul,' he said, suddenly smiling. 'It's time we

were off.' He opened the door to the box.

`Goodbye,' said Leela before she disappeared inside.

'Is that your spaceship?' asked Paul. 'How'd you get that up to 88 miles per

hour?' The Doctor's blank expression told Paul that not everyone had seen Back to

the Future. 'Erm... what about your friend?'

Àh. Well, you won't have to worry about that. Let me deal with it. Just... stay

away from the house for the rest of the day.'

Òkay.'

`Thank you for your help, Paul. And, if you don't mind, not a word about this to

anyone.'

`You're kidding, aren't you?' he said. 'I could sell my story to a tabloid and make millions.'

Òh, that would be fine,' said the Doctor. 'No one believes what they read in the

paper.' He closed the door to the box after him and a few seconds later,

accompanied by a monstrous noise, the box faded from view.

`Far out,' said Paul. He swapped his newspaper bag from one shoulder to the

other, then realised with some dread that he had more than half his round still to

do. He would be late for school. Just like Marty...

06.3°

Six Impossible Things

Before Breakfast

Dan Abnett

It was, in Hex's considered opinion, a noise like no other. Some noises could perhaps be classed as similar, but no sound could quite match that distinctive

part-wheeze, part-creak, part-exhaled air, part-contorted metal noise. Which was

why, when the TARDIS materialised without it that morning, Hex noticed.

The Doctor was in the console room, pottering or perhaps fiddling; the

activities were visually similar.

Hex yawned. 'What time is it?' he asked.

The Doctor gave him a disapproving squint and returned to his fiddling.

Òkay, in the circumstances, a daft question,' Hex conceded, and lent against

the console. Since he'd started doing... whatever job description covered the way **he** was currently spending his life... he'd begun to get used to the idea that once **the** TARDIS doors closed behind him, all bets were off. A few whirs, hums and grumbling wheezes, and — courtesy of a device Hex had unfortunately once

described as a 'portaloo' — they could be anywhere. Anywhen.

It ought to have felt glamorous and exotic, to step, say, from Paris in the belle

Epoque to 58 Pegasi at the time of the Great Kllktkt Expansion, and back, in time

for tea, but it seldom was. Unnerving was a better word, and it didn't help that Paris in the belle époque was probably being bothered by something non-terrestrial that cackled in the sewers and wore a domino mask, or that 58 Pegasi

had a sulphurous atmosphere, no daylight for eighteen-year stretches, and a local language utterly lacking in vowels.

It wasn't that Hex was jaded at all. Oh, no. He left that to McShane. The

TARDIS's

outer doors had only to purr open and reveal a deep, craggy basin of

inky quartz where mauve mists drifted in the dying starlight of ancient suns, and **the** only sound was the distant, melancholy keening of carrion moths, and

McShane would sigh and utter the immortal word: 'Lovely.'

Once 'lovely' had been voiced, it was all down hill from there, with the gasping,

and the screaming, and the running, and the imprisonment, and the corridors.

Ì only meant —' Hex began, but he noticed that the Doctor's fiddling had

reached a fever pitch, and decided to let the rest hang. What he'd only meant was **that** it felt like morning. First thing in the morning. Breakfast time. Years of rising I **on** time for his punishing hospital shifts had set Hex's body clock with an unerring accuracy that no amount of random shuttling across time and relative

dimensions in space could knock out of whack.

Breakfast time. Hex allowed himself a moment to relish that nostalgic feeling.

Having adventures was one thing, but sometimes he really missed the ordinary,

the everyday, the normal, the familiar. Bus queues. Kellogg's Corn Flakes. Capital

Radio. Tofu McBrioches. Junk mail.

Hex leaned forward on his elbows, and watched the crown of that panama hat

bobbing around as the Doctor took his fiddling and pottering to the underside of

the main console.

`So, are we there yet?'

`There? No?' the Doctor's voice came back, the testiness somewhat muffled by

the inspection panel. 'Somewhere, yes.'

`Where?'

Ì'm... relatively sure.'

`That we're somewhere?'

`Yes.'

`But not there. There being wherever we were going?'

`No.'

`But we have stopped?'

The Doctor removed his head and hat from the inspection panel and looked up

at Hex. 'You noticed that?'

Ì noticed something.'

Ànd did you, Thomas Hector Schofield, notice anything particular about that

something?'

`Well, I'm no expert, but the TARDIS didn't seem to make the usual noise. You

know, the whuuuurg-tithuuuurg-whuuuurg-kathump!'

Ànd you said you were no expert.'

Hex shrugged. 'It was more of a kind of pop.'

À pop? Yes, that's what I thought.'

Ìs that good?' Hex asked.

Òn a sliding scale with silence at one end and ka-boom at the other, yes.

Otherwise, I'm rather afraid that the 'nimble mumble mutter...'

The Doctor, naturally, hadn't actually said `mimble mumble mutter', but as his

head had returned to its position inside the main console, that's all Hex got.

`What time is it?' McShane asked. She had plodded into the console room in her

dressing gown, sleepy-eyed and channelling the spirit of the sullen teenager that

life with the Doctor had, it seemed, never quite managed to exorcise.

`Breakfast time,' Hex said.

McShane had evidently arrived at the same conclusion. She was clutching a

carton of semi-skimmed milk, sniffing dubiously at the spout.

`That's probably gone over by now,' Hex said.

She regarded him with eyes that really weren't convinced they wanted to be open

yet. Then she looked back at the carton. 'Best before the sixth of the twelfth '89,'

she said. 'Where are we in relation to that?'

`Somewhere,' Hex said. 'He's relatively sure.'

Ì was woken by a pop,' McShane said, putting the carton down on the console

and folding her arms grumpily.

`Me too. Apparently, that's not good. Or bad, exactly. There's some kind of

scale. It slides.'

'I'm going back to bed,' said McShane. 'I was having this fantastic dream about

fuel-air explosives.'

The Doctor suddenly rose to his feet. 'Interesting,' he announced.

`Her dream?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Our situation. We've tripped.'

`Tripped?' Hex repeated. 'Lightly and fantastically, or in the sense of ouch?'

The Doctor smoothed down the front of his coat and began to pace.

'Both.

Imagine the TARDIS is running along —'

Ìt's got feet now?' McShane yawned.

Ìmagine it's got feet,' resumed the Doctor, 'and it's running along through the

Infinite mysteries of space-time. And something gets in its way and it trips. And

falls out of the recursive dimensional field into reality instead of dematerialising formally. The TARDIS has tripped over something and we've landed... andlor

arrived. Somewhere...'

`You're relatively sure,' said Hex.

'I'm relatively sure.' The Doctor nodded. 'It's quite upset the old girl's systems.'

'A nasty fall like that could break a hip,' Hex said.

`Just get her started again,' McShane said, sitting down on the floor to tie her

shoelaces. 'I want breakfast. I need breakfast. I desire breakfast. It's breakfast

time.'

'It is,' Hex agreed. 'It so is.'

'And I want breakfast somewhere interesting,' McShane went on. 'Ham and

eggs in the Renaissance. Doughnuts on Saturn —'

'They don't serve doughnuts on Sa—' the Doctor began.

'She was being figurative,' said Hex.

'But I wasn't,' the Doctor replied. 'The doughnut place on Saturn went out of

business years ago when they —'

McShane held up a hand. 'This is going to be a really tortuous joke about rings,

Isn't it?'

The Doctor sighed, pursed his lips and hung his head.

McShane took a step or two towards the Doctor until she was face to face with

him. 'Professor? The tortuous jokes only come out when you're covering. When **you're** covering for one of two things. Either we're in extraordinary mortal danger, **or you** have no idea what's going on. Isn't that true?'

The Doctor nodded quietly.

'Which is it?' McShane asked. The Doctor mumbled something. 'I didn't hear

you,' McShane admonished.

The second thing,' the Doctor said. 'The "I've no idea what's going on" thing.'

'Well, that's a relief at least,' said Hex.

'You think?' said McShane.

'Everything's fine! Fine and dandy!' the Doctor protested. 'We've landed. We're

safe. We're somewhere. I know we're somewhere. I'm —'

'Relatively sure?' Hex and McShane said in unison.

'nil

else just get the TARDIS up and running, and — hey presto! — we'll be somewhere

.'

`Just to review, we're agreed that would be somewhere where there will be

breakfast?' McShane asked.

`You can count on it,' the Doctor said, getting down on his knees beside the

console and pulling off another inspection panel. 'It's always breakfast time

somewhere. Just give me a few minutes, and I'll have everything back to normal.'

`There's a normal?' Hex said.

Ìn the meantime,' said McShane, 'we could find out where *we are. I mean, we*

have to be somewhere, right?'

`Just mumble a minute or mimble mutter particle motor fields mumble

spaghetti,' the Doctor replied, half-audibly.

Hex didn't ever dare touch any of the knobs, levers or nano-filament pressure

pads on the console for fear of getting yelled at, but McShane had been aboard the

TARDIS for long enough to know what one dial did, at least. She turned it. With a

soft, querulous murmur, the view screen ignited and an image formed.

Hex and McShane gazed at it for quite a long time.

`That's..? Hex began, finding his voice at last, and realising that it had become

hoarse with emotion while it was missing.

%limey!' said McShane. She took a step back in surprise, and knocked the milk

carton off the console with her elbow. It hit the floor.

Òops,' she said, distractedly.

`You'll have to mop that up,' Hex said, 'or the console room won't half stink.'

`Yeah, I'd really better...'

Neither of them could look away from the screen's image.

`Well?' asked the Doctor, on his back now, like a motor mechanic, under the

console. 'Are we somewhere?'

'Oh, yes,' said Hex.

`Somewhere lovely?' the Doctor asked.

`No,' McShane replied. 'Doctor, we're in London. The South Bank. Late

twentieth century.'

`No, early twenty-first,' Hex corrected.

Òr late twentieth,' said McShane. 'Doctor, our little trip has landed us right back to the closest thing Hex and I call home.'

`What are the chances of that?' the Doctor said, not really listening.

`Looks quiet,' Hex said.

`Yeah,' McShane agreed. 'Really quiet. No one around. Like breakfast time on a

Sunday morning.' They slowly turned and looked at each other. 'Breakfast time on

a Sunday morning,' McShane repeated.

`Somewhere, there's a cafe, or a greasy spoon...' Hex began.

Òr a bagel bar or a McDonald's,' McShane put in.

just opening up. Just unlocking the doors. Just filling the urn and lighting

the grill.'

`Fried bread and bacon,' McShane murmured, closing her eyes.

Ànd poached eggs and tomato slices.' Hex's mouth was watering. Not for any

of that really. Just for normal and ordinary. Sunday morning. The sports section, a cup of tea.

Ì'll get my coat,' said Hex.

`We're going for a wander,' said McShane, 'while you're getting this fixed.'

`Don't go too far,' the Doctor replied.

Às if,' McShane said. 'We're hardly going to get into trouble here. Get working,

and we'll be back before you know it. Want us to bring you anything? For

breakfast?'

The Doctor paused and thought about that 'I'd love a cadimonel prusket,

freshly lava-baked and rolled in terfud grettle, with a dust of silk sugar.'

`Failing that?'

À bacon sarnie.'

Hex and McShane opened the outer doors and stepped into the cool sunshine.

They sniffed the air.

`Lovely,' McShane said, and for the first time in ages, she meant it literally.

They walked down the empty street, past shuttered corner shops and newsagents

and slumbering houses. The sky was a dilute blue, chased with soft cloud. The air

was neither cold nor hot. Brisk. No wind. That endless time at the start of a Sunday when the day promised anything and everything. They could see the dome of St

Paul's, and smell the river.

%limey, it's quiet,' McShane said

`Sunday morning,' Hex replied.

`You get that too?'

Àbsolutely. It's quite evidently Sunday morning. You can almost smell it.'

She smiled. He was right. London was on the cusp of waking up. In an hour or

so, it would be languidly enjoying its day off.

They walked on. Their footsteps sounded bizarrely loud.

`Sunday morning,' Hex said again.

`We've established that.'

`Sunday morning has a quality. Don't you think?'

She shrugged.

À real quality. I can feel it all around me. Can't you? I can. God, it's nice.'

Ì didn't think you believed in God any more,' she teased. 'I mean, not since

entering the portaloo.'

Hex grinned. 'I never did much before, actually, but today he's here. Smiling on

us. Offering us breakfast in the most tranquil and, let me say it, ordinary place in **the** universe.'

Ì hear that,' McShane replied. 'Sunday morning. Although...'

`What?' Hex stopped in his tracks, wary. 'Come on, you're not going to spoil this

with a sudden cry of "Look, Cybermen!" or "The Daleks have invaded!", are you?'

McShane laughed and punched him playfully on the arm. 'No, you lame-o. I was

just going to say that I thought Sunday morning had no essential quality of its

own.'

'No?'

`No. I think, for us, the Sunday morning feeling is far more a consequence of

the Saturday night experience.'

`Hangover, you mean?'

`Bluntly, yes.'

Hex thought about that for a moment. 'Ow,' he said and rubbed his arm. 'You're

probably right. God, I had some good nights out in this town. Me and the nurses.'

Ì'll bet.'

`Some of them were female.'

Ì have no doubt.'

Ènd of a shift on a Saturday, then down the White Rabbit. Then a club. Laugh?

We did a bit of that, I can tell you. Party town, Saturday night, blowing off some

steam. I miss it.'

`Really?' McShane *turned* her most knowing smile on him. She held out her

hands to mimic a set of scales. 'Travelling the multiverse? Righting wrongs?

Having adventures? Or... going out on the razz?'

Hex shrugged. 'Okay, fair point. I'm lucky, in a very twisted kind of way. I

wouldn't swap. But still...'

Ì know what you mean,' said McShane. 'It was nice being ordinary, wasn't it? I

mean, it was never obvious at the time, but from our perspective now. Ordinary.

Normal. Safe. It was nice. Saturday night, out with the gang. Sunday morning...

like this. Quiet. Waking up. Considering breakfast.'

Hex smiled. 'Let's find those sarnies, eh?'

McShane started walking again, then stopped.

`Did you hear that?'

`What?'

`That... sound?'

`What sound?'

`Like... someone rolling around on bubble wrap?'

Hex shook his head. 'No, I didn't.'

McShane sighed. 'Just my imagination, then. Come on. There's a place down by

the Festival Hall that does sausage sangers you wouldn't believe.'

The Doctor looked up from under the console. He'd just manually

repinned 84

gigahertz of nano-pulse flow flex and still the demat system was dead. His sonic

screwdriver was too hot to touch.

Òw!' he said, and put it down.

He slithered out onto his feet. The console room was quiet, the main doors

open. A fresh breeze blew in. Outside, there was London, the South Bank, on a

Sunday morning.

What are the chances of that? Suddenly he remembered saying those words. What

were the chances of that?

He saw the spilt milk carton on the floor, smelled the curdled stink.

`Dorothy Gail McShane!' he shouted. 'You could have at least cleaned up after

yourself!'

He pulled a micron wrench from his coat pocket and fitted a new head. The

basic problem seemed to be that the TARDIS had stalled. 'Tripped' in its journey,

it had rematerialised without knowing it. The phase circuits were still engaged.

8o

The TARDIS thought it was still travelling. It refused to dematerialise because it

hadn't realised it had rematerialised in the first place. He had to persuade it that it had stopped, so he could re-engage the transmat and restart their journey. Until he could manage that, the TARDIS controls would be locked up and frozen.

And they would be stuck fast in this somewhere. He was relatively sure.

He tested the micron wrench in his hand a couple of times. It buzzed

satisfactorily. He hunkered down under the console.

The inspection panel was still in place.

Silly me, the Doctor thought. I've walked around the console and —

He walked around the console. All the panels were in place. There was no sign

of the work he had been doing for the last half an hour.

He stood up, crouched down, and stood up again.

Then he crouched down. His sonic screwdriver lay on the floor. He picked it up.

It was stone cold.

Activating it, he buzzed open the first inspection panel under the console. What

confronted him was a complex web of technology that he had ***never,*** ever seen before. And that he didn't even begin to understand.

Which was rare, even by his standards.

He probed at it. It gave away nothing. The only thing the Doctor could be utterly

sure of was that it was far, far more complex than any system he could ever understand.

He went pale. He hyperventilated a little bit.

He stood up.

'McShane? Hex?' he yelled out of the open doors.

He suddenly, awfully, realised he'd been mistaken. This wasn't the second thing

at all.

It was the first thing.

'I thought you said it was down here?' Hex said.

'I thought it was,' McShane replied. 'My mistake. It's been a while since I was

here. Things have changed a bit.'

'Well, I think this is more my time than yours anyway. Early twenty-first century.

Look, that way. Just to the left of St Paul's. That's the Biodiversity Tower. And **there,** by the river, that's New Westminster House. This is definitely my time.'

She followed his finger along the skyline. 'Yeah, maybe. Let's try the next street

There's got to be a café around here somewhere.'

Neither of them was in any particular hurry. The familiar quiet was

astonishingly relaxing. McShane had spent most of the last ten minutes walking

along the edge of the kerb as if it was a tightrope.

'What is that noise?' she said.

'I still don't hear it,' Hex said.

'Really, it's a funny scrunching, crackling sound.'

'Close by or far away?'

'Neither. Both. I don't know.'

'All I can hear is the background traffic and the breeze,' Hex said.

Si

McShane thought for a moment, then shook her head. She stuck her arms out

sideways and began tightroping the kerb again. After about a minute, she

stopped, teetering on one foot, and stepped down heavily into the gutter.

`What traffic noise?' she said.

Hex stopped and turned round. 'The traffic noise. The hum.'

`There's no traffic. We haven't seen a single car or taxi or —'

`No, not in these sides streets we haven't. I mean the hum we can hear. Distant

traffic noise. Round Waterloo Bridge and across the river.'

`There isn't any. That's what I'm saying. There isn't any hum.'

Hex stood and listened. He listened harder. Finally, he said, 'Oh, my God, you're

right. There should be a hum, but there isn't. My brain must have just filled in the hum because I expected it to be there. There's really nothing. I mean, nothing.'

Ì know.'

`That's kind of odd.'

Ì know.'

`We haven't seen anything or anyone at all. Not since we stepped outside. I

mean, Sunday morning or no Sunday morning, that's odd.' He looked at her

sharply. 'I heard that.'

`So did I.'

A crackling, clattering sound, like someone rolling on bubble wrap, or

scooping dry pasta out of a packet, or like a dog with untrimmed claws trotting

across linoleum.

`What the hell is that?' Hex said.

Ì don't know,' said McShane, 'but I've just noticed something else, and I don't

think you're going to like it.'

`Why not?'

`Because I don't.'

It confounded him, and the Doctor didn't like being confounded. He applied a

little direct logic. He no longer understood the inner workings of the TARDIS, so

either he had suffered a massive drop in IQ, possibly with an attendant amnesiac

episode, or the inner workings of the TARDIS had been significantly altered.

He'd pulled off all the inspection panels, removed a section of the console's

upper fascia, and revealed a complex, intestinal mass of cables and wires, the

arrangement of which defied all sense.

Unless that was the point..

He crossed to the open doors. London lurked silently outside. He called out for

McShane and Hex, but there was no answer. He waited.

He heard a distant scratching sound, like shingle, like stones in a plastic bucket.

It was faint. But it was getting closer.

`Look there,' said McShane, pointing to another part of the skyline. 'That's St

Oswald South Bank.'

`So what?'

`When did they build the Biodiversity Tower, Hex?'

Twenty-eighteen. Why?'

`The St Oswald South Bank was demolished in 1987.'

Òh,' said Hex. 'Listen, I'm starting to get a really queasy feeling. It's putting me right off breakfast'

McShane turned in a full circle, slowly, staring. 'It's the London you know, and

the London I know. It's both. Like it's trying to please us.'

Ì'm going to ask... what is?' he asked.

Someone rolled on bubble wrap less than a street away. Closer, the sound had a

harder edge. Like claws, or teeth.

Ì think we should go back to the TARDIS,' Hex suggested.

Ì agree completely,' she replied. They started to walk firmly, purposefully, back

the way they'd come.

The noises behind them grew louder and more frequent.

`Just keep going,' McShane said.

`Look around us,' Hex said. 'My God, how did this ever fool us?'

`What do you mean?'

Now, it's obvious. There's no detail. Everything's just an impression. Look at

those cars parked over there. What make are they? What are the registration

numbers?'

Ì_ I can't tell,' she admitted. 'They're just car shapes, with number plates that

sort of look like they've got letters on them.' She glanced at him nervously. 'Were we that stupid? I mean, were we really that stupid?'

`No.' He shook his head. 'The mind fills in a lot. We saw what we expected to

see. Like... I expected to hear traffic hum, so I did. Look at the shops there. Their signs don't mean anything, but I swear when we came this way earlier they seemed

to. And

He walked over to a post box and pushed his fingers into the slot. They wouldn't

go. It wasn't a hole, just a black oblong that was part of the box.

Ìt's like a version of London built by someone who's never actually seen it. Just

enough suggestion to let our minds fill in the rest.'

Àn‌d we only saw through it because our ideas of London don't match.'

`Lucky for us,' Hex said. 'You realise everything we're saying points to the idea

that this is all for our benefit? That this has all been done because it's what we

wanted to see?'

`That had crossed my mind.'

`Like, you know... a trap?'

`That had also crossed my mind.'

They started to run. The noises behind them suddenly deepened in tone,

became gritty and hard, like the teeth of a bulldozer gouging into flinty earth.

McShane looked back. 'Flipping hell, Hex. St Paul's has gone.'

'What?'

Still running, he glanced back too. Part of the skyline had simply worn away into

nothing, into a faint, vacant blur. As he watched, a line of roofs visible two streets away slowly faded out He glimpsed something large and dark out there beyond

the nearby buildings, something moving closer.

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They began to run as fast as they could. Little by little, from the edges in,

London slowly began to disappear.

The TARDIS stood at the end of the next street, a tiny block of reality in an

impressionistic world. Hex whooped when he saw it. It seemed so ordinary

compared to the suggested world slowly closing down all around him. It was a

strange, sobering thought that the TARDIS now represented all that was ordinary

and normal in his life.

`Doctor!' McShane yelled as they raced in through the doors. 'We've got to —'

Òh, I'm *well* aware of that,' the Doctor said.

`Have you fixed the problem?' Hex asked. 'Tell me you've fixed the problem.'

`No, but I've identified it. Whatever it is outside, it isn't London...'

Way ahead of you,' said Hex.

Ànd this isn't the TARDIS,' McShane added.

The Doctor grinned at her. 'Smart girl. What gave it away?'

The milk I knocked over isn't on the floor. And there's something not

quite

right about the controls.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Oh, it's a very clever pretence, I'll grant you. Very clever.

Subliminally convincing. Certainly quite enough, I would think, to keep most prey

quiet and calm until it can be finished off.'

`What are you saying?' Hex asked, not actually wanting any detail to the reply.

Ànd please don't use words like "prey".'

`Close the doors,' said the Doctor. 'Not that that will slow it down much. Close

the doors and let's get moving.'

Hex ran to the doors. Outside, the light had gone thin, the colour of straw, and

very little of London seemed to remain The crackling and crunching sounded all

around. A shadow moved at the edge of his peripheral vision, something there but

not quite there, as Hex forced the doors closed.

`Come on!' the Doctor cried, and they followed him out of the console room into

the interior of the TARDIS. The crackling, popping sounds penetrated even here,

like something was munching behind the skirting boards and the wall panels.

`The real TARDIS is in here somewhere, hidden behind this fake. Keep moving!'

`Do you have an explanation for this, Doctor?'

Òf course!' he replied. They had just turned a corner into another console

room.

`Not this one,' the Doctor decided. Ònwards!'

Into another corridor. Hex, bringing up the rear, saw the false console room

slowly wearing away behind them.

`We've fallen victim to a predator in the vortex,' the Doctor called out as he ran.

`Probably a naturally occurring creature.'

Ìn the vortex?' said Hex, incredulously.

Òh, there are many forms of life in the time stream, Mr Hex. Races ride on the

winds of time, live in the neverwhen between time and space. Most are peaceful,

but there are creatures that hunt on organisms and objects that cross the time

stream itself.'

`Like the TARDIS?'

`Like the TARDIS. The hunters snare their victim, then present it with some

reassuring and familiar surroundings to keep it docile and occupied while it

moves in to devour it.'

Another console room.

`Not this one, either! Come on, the pair of you.'

`So it showed us London?' Hex said, trying to keep up.

`Yes, and it showed me a TARDIS too complicated to fix. It's like a carnivorous

plant, making itself look like raw meat or whatever else an insect considers tasty, sticking it fast so it can be digested at leisure.'

`Doctor!' Hex yelled.

The three of them turned. The end of the corridor behind them had just

vanished. They could see the edges of the floor, walls and ceiling slowly

disintegrating towards them, fraying away into nothing. Beyond was a void, a

half-lit place of shocking emptiness through which some huge shadow flickered

as it closed in.

`There I was, wanting breakfast,' McShane said, 'and all the time that's what *we* were.'

`We're really rather running out of space and time,' the Doctor said, genuine

alarm in his voice as he hurried them on. 'I suppose it's possible that the real

TARDIS might have been digested already.'

'No,' said McShane suddenly. 'This way.'

Àre you sure?'

`Can't you smell it?'

Milk. The sweet, foetid smell of gone-off milk.

They burst into yet another console room. This time it was the right one. The

carton lay on the floor in a puddle of goo. Several inspection panels were off, and there was no time to replace them.

`Hold on,' said the Doctor, and he threw the dematerialisation lever. The

popping and cracking and crunching wrapped in tight around them.

And then another noise joined it, overlapped it and finally drowned it out until

it had gone altogether. It was a very distinctive noise, in Hex's considered opinion, a noise like no other.

Well, except perhaps one...

`Does that happen often?' Hex asked.

`Hardly ever,' replied the Doctor. He was fitting the last of the console panels

back into place. 'Which is good.'

That'd be good on this sliding scale of yours?'

Èxactly. We're safe, the TARDIS is fine, and everything's back to normal,' said

the Doctor. 'I'm relatively sure.'

Hex shook his head. 'But... we could have been eaten. I mean actually eaten. In

an edible sense.'

`But we weren't,' the Doctor pointed out. 'Pull yourself together, Mr Hex.

What's done is done. There's no point crying over spilt milk.'

Òh, I'm going back to bed,' said McShane. They both looked at her. She

shrugged. 'I've come to the conclusion,' she said dourly, 'that I'm not a morning

person.'

`Just find a mop first, if you don't mind, young lady,' the Doctor said. 'This place is really starting to pong.'

McShane sighed. 'Lovely,' she said.

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08.00

The Heroine, the Hero and

the Megalomaniac

Ian Mond

The Heroine's Story

8.00am

Venetia started losing her identity the moment she touched the device. Alien

memories masqueraded as her own, surging through her mind. For a moment she

was riding a dragon with the sky exploding around her, then she was back in the

real world nearly tripping over her own feet.

Behind her, she heard someone say, 'There! Quick!'

Damn!

The two strangers were racing towards her, the guy looking confused, the girl

angry. Venetia had their device tucked in the pocket of her floral dress.

She regained her footing and started dodging and weaving through open

grassland. If the Baron was watching, he wouldn't be impressed by her

performance. The job had been simple: dress up like a local, find

the two

strangers, and steal their device without alerting them. And she had been

successful, until this sudden rush of bizarre memories — plum pudding...

Alex

Venice...

Grayle — had overwhelmed her mind.

She reached Asquith Forest, the strangers not far behind. Barrelling through the undergrowth, thin branches drew blood from her face. She wasn't too bothered;

in her line of work, scars were a lifestyle choice.

She found herself some cover behind a thick mass of telar bushes. She could

bear the strangers searching for her in the distance, their voices becoming more and more indistinct.

Just to be sure, Venetia stayed low for a few seconds more. Huge reeza trees

loomed over her, and from beneath them came the skitter-scatter sound of bugs

and small furry animals. Venetia had never been a nature person. Until recently, the only nature she'd seen was the mud, weeds and guts she scraped from her

boots after a mission.

Oh, but I *loved* my walks with *Father. Whenever he came home from travelling, we'd take*

a *wander through Bromhurst woods and he'd tell me of his* exciting adventures in the East. And we'd sit by *the* lake, *and I* would *dangle my feet in the cool water and —*

Where were these rubbish memories coming from?!

Venetia removed the alien device from the pocket of her dress. It was black,

cylindrical, smooth to the touch, and definitely the cause of the havoc in her head.

Gotta get this damn thing back to the Baron, she thought, fingering a spot

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below her right collarbone, and I've got to do it now before I go completely insane.

And before he kills me.

She left the forest, the strangers nowhere to be seen. As she made her way

towards the Manor House, the device in her pocket chirped and -

- Venetia was running in the opposite direction, back to the market square.

She had lost total control of her body.

8.x8am

Venetia arrived at the market square in record time, shaking with exhaustion.

The damn device hadn't stopped chirping since she'd lost control of her legs.

And the fake memories were getting worse.

She's caught in the middle of a riot... *she's* drinking *sweet tea* with a talking octopus... she's staring up at a night sky *where the* stars *dance* like *angels... she glimpses silver death* on *a derelict spaceship.*

Around her, the square overflowed with hawkers selling their wares, townsfolk

haggling over prices and dirty children chasing chickens. All of them oblivious to

her identity crisis.

Near the backend of the square a wrinkled old man with crazy eyes was selling

handmade jewellery. As she approached, the alien device's chirping became a

screech. Hidden in the shadows behind the old hawker was a familiar blue box.

'Is that yours?' she asked the old man.

'Are you gonna buy something?' The hawker picked up a chain-link bracelet.

'Five Armstrongs and she's yours.'

'I' m more interested in the box.'

'Oh, that,' the man said, yawning. 'It was here when I set up this morning. I was

gonna move it, but who's got the strength these days? So what about this?' The

man showed her an intricately crafted necklace. 'Took me three months to make,

cost you ten Armstrongs.'

She ignored the crazy hawker's offer. Only the box mattered; rough edges,

peeling blue paint, faded white writing.

I'm home.

She sidestepped the hawker, her right hand outstretched, fingers tingling with

electricity. She knew that once she touched the box one identity would be totally

subsumed. And the part of her that was Venetia Dalborough, the part that shared

rude jokes with the boys, revelled in the subtle art of killing, and drunk too much on those lonely nights between missions, knew her

number was finally up. The

Edwardian, with her sugar-and-spice-and-all-things-nice disposition was about to

reclaim her rightful position in Venetia's head.

Fingertips brushed against the blue surface and...

she was on some sort of aircraft — airship — and there were flames everywhere

—'We're going to crash!' — and she could hear screams — the crew of the Run — and

there was no escape — this is how I really died... '

... and then he emerged from the flames, untouched by the chaos, with his

eccentric clothes, his shoulder-length brown hair, his wild smile and devilish

eyes... the missing ingredient in all her memories.

`Doctor!' she shouted. 'You're the Doctor! You're my best friend!'

`Welcome back!' The Doctor laughed, and then he said her real name, and

everything that was Venetia Dalborough — all the drinking, cursing and killing —

was gone forever.

Ì know who I am!' she shouted. The Doctor had vanished and so had the raging

inferno, but the blue box — the TARDIS — remained, and she gave it an all-

consuming hug.

The crazy old hawker tapped her on the shoulder. 'Since you like it so much,

maybe we could do a deal on the box.'

She turned around and smiled. 'I'm so sorry. My name's Charlotte Elspeth

Pollard, Charley to my friends, and it's a pleasure to meet you.'

`How about twenty Armstrongs? Good deal for a sturdy box, you won't —' There

was a sudden pop, like a balloon bursting, and the hawker stumbled, a sizeable

hole where his face used to be.

Charley screamed, turned and found herself staring into the muzzle of a

smoking gun. 'Hey there, Venetia,' said the gun's owner. 'The boss wants a word.

8.28am

The killer was short and stocky, with the face of an ox. He was wearing a tight

leather vest and matching trousers, and chewed something that looked

suspiciously like raw meat. He holstered his gun, snatched away the TARDIS

tracker that Charley had stolen from the strangers, grabbed hold of her arm and

grinned. There were small slivers of meat caught between his teeth, and Charley

gagged at the stench of rotting flesh. 'Don't you ever brush your teeth?'

`Shut up, girl, or I'll whack you one.' He dragged Charley to the TARDIS and

slapped a spherical device against the blue door. With his free hand he activated

another contraption that was strapped around his arm.

Charley's stomach did a somersault as the market square, the dead hawker and

the knick-knacks disappeared in a blaze of light. When the stars had cleared,

Charley found herself in a laboratory. A bench stretched the length of one wall,

brimming with all sorts of equipment. The TARDIS sat alongside the bench,

seeming a little silly amongst all the musty paraphernalia and newfangled devices.

A thoughtful-looking man, with silky white hair and the bluest of blue eyes, was

caressing the TARDIS exterior. He was dressed in evening *wear,* a high-collared shirt, a creamy white cravat and a crimson waistcoat.

Charley recognised him immediately — the Baron.

"Germer, could you please show our guest to the artefact.'

The killer dragged Charley towards something shaped vaguely like a chair, only

sculpted from bone and flesh. It was strangely familiar, and for a moment Charley

could smell freshly mown grass, sweet honey and baked bread.

The smell of memories.

`Sit down, girl,' said Gertner, pushing her onto the soft, rippling flesh. Charley

grimaced as something warm and wet soaked through the thin fabric of her torn

and tattered dress.

Metal clamps were fastened around her arms and legs, pinching into her skin.

`Thank you very much, Gertner.' The Baron's attention was now on Charley.

`Could you please leave the two of us alone?'

The *mercenary* pouted. 'Can't I watch?'

`No, Gertner.' His voice now held a hint of menace. 'This is only for adults.'

Gertner grunted, but did as he was told.

`Charlotte Pollard.' The Baron said her name as if uttering a prayer. 'When we

met only a few hours ago, you told me your name was Charlotte Smith.'

Ànd you never told me what a maniac you were.' It was a pretty poor insult, not

up to Charley's own high standards. And yet it had the most amazing effect on the

Baron: he actually covered his mouth and giggled like a schoolgirl.

Òh, dear, I really must watch what I say around you, Charlotte. You are so very

funny.' The Baron held up the TARDIS tracker. 'Do you know what this is?'

Ì've no idea.'

They both knew she was lying, but that didn't seem to bother the Baron at all.

Òf course you know what it is, my dear, just like you know all about that

magnificent blue box behind me. I'll be honest, I did have doubts about you when

you came to the house this morning. That awful story about your poor daddy and

how he'd broken his legs and could no longer work.' The Baron's grin

showed off

perfectly formed teeth. 'Your tale of woe really tugged at my heart strings, but it never convinced me.'

Ì really have no idea what you're babbling on about,' Charley said. 'And how

dare you accuse me of lying. I have a reputation to protect!'

The Baron burst out into a gale of giggles. 'Oh, dear me!' He sighed, wiping the

tears from his eyes. 'I really was hoping you might be stubborn. You *see,* I have this new toy and it does the most marvellous things and I was really looking forward

to testing out its new function on you.'

Wh... what toy?'

The chair you're sitting on, the very same chair that rewrote your memories.

Did you enjoy being Venetia Dalborough? I thought it would be fun to take a sweet

girl from the village and transform her into a killer. *Pygmalion* in reverse, you might say. Of course, if I'd known you were a spy, I wouldn't have bothered.'

`Those memories were horrible. Are you saying this... this disgusting thing I'm

strapped to can change a person?'

The Baron nodded, eyes gleaming. 'Oh, yes. What surprised me is that you

broke your conditioning. You're back to the way you were and seemingly without

suffering any psychological trauma. Interesting.'

Charley knew that it was most probably the TARDIS that could be thanked for

her state of mind. Touching it had somehow restored her real personality - if she

hadn't found it, perhaps she would have been this 'Venetia' forever...

`Most delicious of all is your discovery of the Doctor's TARDIS.'

Now Charley was really confused. How did the Baron know about the Doctor or

his TARDIS? It was like he'd been expecting him, and yet their arrival on

Armstrong's Colony hadn't been planned. And then something else occurred to

her, something she'd completely forgotten in amongst all the identity swapping.

The thing she'd stolen from the two strangers - it was a TARDIS tracker!

The Baron continued. `So that's why I've strapped you to my chair, my

wonderful new toy. A few weeks ago I discovered that it did more than just rewrite

memories; it also extracts them. The only drawback is that the chair has an

unfortunate knack of killing anyone who goes through the process. It looks

awfully painful, and I'm sure you'll scream in pain, but rest assured that your

knowledge will be used to further the dreams and desires of myself and my family.'

With a beatific smile, the Baron whispered something beneath his breath.

Charley felt something sharp and savage drill into both sides of her temple. And

the pain... Oh, God, the pain...

It all became a bit of a blur after that.

Charley Pollard is lost in a world of agony.

Something is tearing *at her memories with the ferocity of* a rabid *dog. She can see* Mummy and Daddy and sisters *Peggy and* Sissy, and they seem to *be waving* to *her, tears rolling down their faces* and *she* wants *to* ask them *what's wrong* but can't *because she's dead.* Didn't *we* tell you? *Charley's deader* than *dead. Died on* an airship... *or* so they say... and all that remains is barely a handful *of* ash, not *even enough to fill* a quarter of an urn. But Mummy and Daddy and *Peggy and Sissy are going* to bury *her anyway, because* it's *the right* thing to *do.*

And standing right *next* to them is *the Doctor...* except... *he's changed for the occasion.*

He's much smaller for *one* thing, *and he's holding* an umbrella with a question mark for *a handle* — how silly — and his eyes aren't devilish or cheeky or happy but so earnest *and* sombre and *he's saying something* to *her* parents, but she can't hear because she's *dead.* Didn't *we tell* you? Charley's *deader* than *dead.* Died on an airship... or *so* they say... and all that remains is barely *a handful of ash,* not *even enough* to fill a quarter of an urn. But Mummy and Daddy and *Peggy* and Sissy and the Doctor are *going to bury her* anyway, *because* it's the right thing to *do.*

'BUT I'M NOT DEAD!' *she* screams.

No, you're not, whispers a voice. He's been very irresponsible.

And for a brief moment, the pain increases to the point where Charley is *going to die...*

properly this time... *Deader* than dead. Died on *a small colony world... or so* they say... and this time *there was* a body... except Mummy and Daddy and peggy and Sissy *never saw it...*

because they *were* dead as well.

8.50am

Her eyes sprung open. 'Please don't bury me!' she screamed.

'Oh, Charley, I'd never bury you... well, maybe in the sand... but only

for some

fun.'

Through blurry eyes she saw the Doctor. He'd come and rescued her. How sweet

of him. Charley smiled and looked up into his dirty, grimy face. 'What happened **to you?**'

'Oh, this and that. Would you like to get off this cold laboratory floor?'

The Doctor helped Charley to her feet. She winced in pain, her skin red and raw **like** a very bad case of sunburn. The Doctor handed her his coat and she draped it **around** her shoulders, covering what remained of her poor floral dress.

'What happened to that?' Charley's eyes were fixed on what had once been the

flesh-and-bone chair. It had shrivelled like an old crone, leaving a mound of white ash.

Ìt was like that when I got here.' The Doctor turned to face her. 'Come on, it's

time we were going.'

Charley shook her head, pulling the Doctor's coat tighter around her. 'No...

something happened here... the Baron... and the other man... and the TARDIS,

where's the TARDIS?'

The Doctor turned to face her and he looked so earnest and sombre... and

frightened. Then his happy expression returned; he was smiling, clapping his

hands together, anxious to move on. 'The TARDIS is where we left it, Charley.' He

placed a comforting arm around her shoulder. 'Have I shown you the Van Koll

system? What a party place that is, you can drink and eat as much as you want and

never experience any after-effects...'

Hearing the Doctor ramble on relaxed Charley, dulled the pain, set her chaotic

mind at ease. Yet, she couldn't shake the sneaking suspicion the Doctor was

hiding something from her.

Something that scared him silly.

The Hero's Story

8.00am

The Doctor could feel a sense of foreboding just around the corner, and he wasn't

sure whether he wanted to chat with it.

For the last hour he'd *been searching* the cave system, his temporal indicator leading him deeper and deeper into the darkness with only his torch lighting the

way. He didn't really need the indicator; the Doctor's own senses were acute

enough to follow the chronon distortion. But sometimes it was nice to use the

tools you'd cobbled together between exciting adventures.

Now the Doctor stood at the threshold of a large, dark and very dank chamber,

the indicator's gauge red-lining. He knew exactly what he was about to face and

the implications disturbed him.

The Doctor turned off his torch, pocketed his indicator and took a step into the

darkness.

Braziers on either side of him burst into life, revealing two men standing at the

opposite end of the chamber. Both were armed, wore leather vests and trousers

and stood on either side of a very comfortable-looking easy chair. Shadows

obscured the seated figure. All the Doctor could *see* were a pair of well-polished brown brogues.

It was all so theatrical.

A familiar face emerged from the shadows: sorrowful eyes, chin resting on a

question-marked umbrella, straw hat perched on dark hair.

`Hello me,' both Doctors said in unison.

8.o3am

The Doctor rarely ever crossed paths with his other selves, but when he did it was

often a sign that all time and space was on the brink of collapse. Even so, a part of him had hoped he might meet Teeth and Curls. ***There*** was an incarnation who knew how to have fun.

Instead, he was lumped with everyone's favourite party pooper, Dark and

Manipulative.

'Begleiter, Tenkoff, leave me with Professor Smith, and tell Falsten that I'd like

to see him.' When the two men had departed, Dark and Manipulative turned to the

Doctor. 'I like the hair, reminds me of our College days... but the coat... oh, dear.'

'Well, I'm glad to see you're not wearing the jumper with all the question

marks.' The Doctor put a finger to his lips. 'That must mean you're traveling

with... Ace... and Hex?'

'You don't remember bringing both of them here to Armstrong's Colony?'

'As a matter of fact, no. I also don't recall being the leader of a military unit with **a** distinct leather fetish.'

'Don't you find that a little disturbing?' The other Doctor was perched on the

edge of the seat, eyes glittering with curiosity.

'Well, you could say I've mellowed since my regeneration. I hadn't realised

before how much guilt was clogging up my mind like psychic cholesterol. I

suppressed more than I can remember... if memory serves. Obviously, I kept all

the important events: you know, destroying Skaro, remembering where I kept my

dry-cleaning receipts and, of course, the true name of God. So I think I'd

remember meeting my future self in a horrible little cave on Armstrong's Colony.'

'In other words, you have no idea what's going on.'

The Doctor found his former incarnation's attitude irritating. Actually, he found

his former incarnation irritating. And he was sure the feeling was mutual. 'Oh, I

can take a stab,' he said. 'You're in the middle of some complex, convoluted game,

likely involving the Baron and those mercenaries you were just ordering around. I

just hope Charley is all right.'

The other Doctor leaned forward, shadows hiding everything but his eyes. 'You

sent your companion to investigate the Baron, the source of the energy emissions.'

He rose from his chair, his umbrella hanging from the crook of his arm. 'We need to make contact.'

The Doctor wasn't fond of having his former self stamping his footprints all

over his mind, but he needed to understand what was going on; he had a feeling Charley's life depended on it.

The two Time Lords faced each other.

The Doctor sighed. 'Why couldn't you have been Teeth and Curls?'

8.09am

'Contact'

The TARDIS is the first to detect that there's something ***wrong.***

You check the ***readings*** and are puzzled by what you see.

'Is there something amiss?' ***Charley is peering over*** your shoulder.

'I'm not sure,' you ***say. 'We've materialised*** on Armstrong's ***Colony.'***

A *dangerous place?'*

Òh, no, Charley, it's the most gorgeous planet, verdant and lush with *valleys* and hills that *seem* to roll on forever — *a real green* and pleasant land. And the people are so friendly. They're the descendants of a colony ship that crashed on the planet centuries *ago.* They've

turned their back on technology and live an idyllic *medieval* life. It's all so peaceful.'

Charley fakes *a yawn.* `But *where's the* adventure, Doctor? *Where's the* thrills *and* spills, the japes and scrapes?'

'That's the thing,' you say. The TARDIS is *detecting a* high level of technology, the sort of technology that shouldn't *exist* on the planet. I *believe* it's coming from the manor house —

that's *where the local* baron lives, *he's the* ruler.' You turn to Charley, flashing your cheekiest *grin. "I don't suppose you could do some spying* for me?'

You don't *tell her the whole* truth.

The TARDIS has *also detected a high level* of chronon *energy.* You *recognise* the artron signature.

Charley returns to the console room *dressed in a* pretty floral dress, *the height* of fashion on Armstrong's Colony. She's excited, anxious to do some snooping around.

You hand *Charley a* map directing *her* to the manor house. You ask her to be mufti', *to* do her spying and then head straight back to *the* TARDIS.

And what *will* you *be doing?' she* says.

Ì'll be looking *for the other* source of technology *the* TARDIS has detected. The signal isn't as strong.' You're not entirely sure why you're lying to her; you reason you're doing it for her safety. But what *are* you protecting her from?

You *leave* the TARDIS and *go* your separate *ways.*

Charley to the manor house.

You to *meet your other self.*

`Contact.'

The TARDIS is *the* first to *detect* that *there's something* wrong.

You check the *reading* and are disturbed by what *you see.*

Ìs there a problem, Professor?' *Ace is* peering over your shoulder. 'I

think all that buffeting made Hex sick.'

Ì'm not *sure,'* you say. *'We've* materialised in the Van Koll system, but I think I miscalculated the coordinates.'

You're *lying.* The TARDIS is exactly *where* it's meant to *be,* except all those party planets filled with food, drink and *waltzing no longer exist.* It's *like they have been* plucked from *the* time stream, *leaving* huge temporal scars in their wake.

Ace cocks an eyebrow, she's not convinced. But *she* knows better than to interrogate you.

You track the temporal distortion to Armstrong's Colony. You've been there before. It's a little quiet for your *tastes,* not the sort of place you'd expect *the web* of time to become *tangled.*

You materialise *on Armstrong's* Colony. Hex is a little confused, he was hoping for lots *of* drinking and eating and *dancing.* But *Ace* covers for you admirably, explaining this sort of thing happens all the time.

'I *expect an* explanation at some point, Doctor,' *she* whispers in your *ear.*

It's hot and humid on Armstrong's Colony. 'It looks like Cumbria,' Hex *says and laughs* nervously; the young man is still finding his TARDIS *legs.*

You hand Hex a TARDIS tracker — just in *case he* gets into trouble — and then bid *adieu* to 96

both your companions. Hex looks puzzled by your sudden *departure;* Ace simply nods and winks. Once they've wandered *off,* you double back and *re-enter* the TARDIS.

You start researching the temporal distortion. You link it back to an Ikoran artefact — a therapy chair — stolen by one Baron Denton de Kay Leigh. More research and you *discover* the Baron is a typical megalomaniac, funding his *wild dreams* by *stealing and* selling ancient artefacts. The Baron employs mercenaries to *do* his dirty work. This *gives* you an idea.

You travel back in time and track down *a* posse of mercenaries working for him, led by the unorthodox Falsten. You offer Falsten money and freedom: a share of the *Baron's* treasures and *release* from his pain discs.

Falsten is sceptical. Those *are* just words. *Me* and my men *are gonna need* more than that.'

You drop at Falsten's feet ten bags filled with gold *coins.* The other mercenaries whisper amongst themselves, few of them have *seen so* much gold.

But you can't just *wow* these men with money; you need to *gain* their fear.

So you aim your sonic screwdriver at one of the men pawing over the coins. Seconds *later* the mercenary is on his knees, *screaming* in pain.

What *are* you trying *to **prove?'*** Falsten's *voice* remains calm, but you can *see* the apprehension in the *mercenary's* eyes.

That the Baron is a minnow compared to me. Betrayal is not an option you should

consider. I *have* eyes and *ears everywhere.'*

Falsten *seems convinced.* 'So what do you want in return?'

'Information.'

Over the *next* two months, you regularly pop in on Falsten and his men. You question him about the Baron's operation, about his recent acquisitions. You ask about the therapy chair and he tells you it's the Baron's pride and joy. Sometimes, you're *forced* to remind him and his men that you're in control, that they take orders from you. It *leaves a bitter taste* in your mouth.

You finally return to the present. You find *Ace* and Ha —from their point of *view, you've* been away barely any time at all.

&main

Ànd now I have my answer,' the small man murmured.

The Doctor shook his head. `No_ you're wrong. It's not Charley.'

`There had to be something else,' his earlier self said. 'Don't you see? When the

machine begins to extract your companion's memories, especially those

memories associated with you, the temporal distortion widens exponentially. The

chair is the trigger and she's the bomb!'

The Doctor snorted. 'This is not Charley's fault.'

`No, it's your fault You saved her and now she's leaving a trail of temporal

anomalies wherever she goes. The fact that we're even having this conversation is

evidence of that.'

Ìt isn't Charley,' the Doctor repeated, knowing he didn't sound too confident.

The other Doctor sighed. 'You've suspected the same thing for some time now.

You know the threat she poses, but you refuse to do anything about it. You don't

want to face up to the mistake you made. Deep down, very deep, you know you're

going to need to deal with Charley. Just as you know that, in order to protect the

web of time, you will have to lose her forever.'

Ìt's always the same with you, isn't it?' the Doctor shouted. 'Web of time this,

web of time that; you'd manipulate everyone, even your own companions, just to

keep time happy. But that was your obsession, not mine. I wanted to explore again,

wanted to let my hair down and remember what it was like to enjoy life. I knew the

moment I met Charley that she would share my vision; she was so

vibrant, so eager

to travel, so alive. And I would show her the most marvellous, glorious things and

I would see everything again through her eyes. So, yes: when the time came, I

refused to let her die, I refused to let her bum to death, I refused to let her be just another insignificant statistic. I refused! And I would do it again!'

The little man scowled. `So the universe is sacrificed just so you can have some

fun.'

`How dare you reduce my relationship with Charley to that! And how dare you,

of all people, accuse me of sacrificing others. Those mercenaries are just a means

to an end. A source of information and now a helpful distraction while you go

behind the Baron's back and steal away the artefact. And if all of Falsten's men get slaughtered in the process... well, their sacrifice was all in a good cause.'

Ìt's easy being idealistic when you have a total disregard for the laws of time.

And what you happily forget is if it wasn't for your wanton and reckless actions, I wouldn't need to be in the company of mercenaries!'

The two Time Lords stood face to face, both shaking with anger.

The Doctor stared into the furious eyes of his previous incarnation and saw his

own ugly expression reflected back. Why did it always end like this? Why couldn't

he ever get along with himself ?

He took a step backward, breaking eye contact 'She's my

responsibility, I need

to be the one to free her.'

`Yes, she's your responsibility. But everything is precariously placed at the

moment and —'

The Doctor didn't let him finish. 'I won't be sidelined, not when Charley's life

is at stake and especially not by my younger self. I'm quite capable of dazzling the Baron with my rapier wit'

Ì don't doubt that for a moment,' replied the other. 'But you don't have access

to the security codes to his laboratory. I kept that information hidden when we

made contact. I'm sorry, but I must be the one to do this.'

The Doctor turned his back on his former self. Arguing would get him nowhere.

Ì won't let her die,' the other Doctor whispered. 'I'll treat her like one of my

own.'

8.18am

Falsten arrived.

He was quite different from his leather-clad colleagues. He was dressed in a red

shirt, a pair of dusty jeans and what looked like snakeskin books.

Falsten sneered at the Doctor. `So, what's the deal with him?'

`Professor Smith is an associate. He'll be helping with the attack.'

Falsten grunted. 'And I s'pose he's got the controller.'

Òh, yes.' His earlier self produced a smile so nasty that even the

shuddered. 'And like myself, he won't be afraid to use it' He turned to the Doctor

`Do you think you can handle things?'

'No, I'm totally at a loss. I was wondering if you could draw some diagrams for

me.'

Èxcellent. I hope we never meet again.' And with that, he vanished in a brilliant blaze of light.

8.21am

Falsten wasn't exactly the chattiest of fellows. When he wasn't grunting,

grumbling or growling, he was painting the cave floor with huge gobs of brown

phlegm.

As the Doctor dodged another soggy missile he pointed to Falsten's collarbone.

'I don't suppose I could look at the pain device.'

Falsten licked his lips, eyes nervous. 'I'm not gonna mess with you, okay? I

respect the Doc and if he says you're the man, then you're the man.'

The Doctor flashed one of his most disarming smiles. 'I'm not going to hurt

you, Falsten. I just want a squiz at the technology.'

Falsten considered this. 'S'pose you could kill me whenever, so it's not like I got much of a choice, is it?' He unbuttoned the top half of his shirt. Just below the right collarbone was a small, round unit attached to the skin.

`So, this is what the Baron used to keep you and your men in line. Such an

innocuous-looking thing, just another harmless piece of metal. What happens if

you try to remove it?'

'It blows up.'

Òh. Do you mind if I touch it?'

Falsten took a hurried step back. 'Yes! I bleedin' well do!'

`Fine, fine.' The Doctor reached into his pocket and removed his sonic

screwdriver.

Falsten gasped, eyes wide with fear. 'What the hell! Please, Professor, please

don't hurt me... we did as we was told.'

`No, no, no, no, you've got it all wrong, I'm not going to harm you, I'm going

to free you.'

`But the Doctor said —'

Òh, don't worry about him. please, Falsten, trust me.'

Falsten shook his head. 'What damn choice do I have'

The Doctor smiled, pleasant and warm 'Very soon, all the choice in the world.'

8.3oam

There were 15 mercenaries in the chamber. Aside from Falsten, they all wore body armour and leather trousers, and carried a variety of weapons: old-fashioned

projectile guns, blasters, knives. A fearsome bunch of killers who were quite

prepared to slaughter and maim just for the sheer thrill.

And yet they were frightened of the Doctor.

He could see it in their eyes, in the subtle movements of their hands, in the way they shuffled their *feet*

99

And he was ashamed.

Moments ago, the Doctor had freed the last of the mercenaries from his slave

device. Now the men were staring at him, nervous eyes wondering what nasty

surprise he might be hiding up his sleeves.

'I' m honestly not going to hurt you,' he said.

'So... why did you free us?' Falsten asked.

`Because... because I don't like the idea of forcing people to fight for causes they don't particularly believe in. If you come with me you'll be mainly doing myself

and the... the Doctor a favour.'

`What about the treasures he promised?'

The Doctor paused, not entirely sure he'd actually thought this through

properly. 'There is no reward.'

An angry murmur from the other mercenaries. They were no longer nervous:

now, flinty eyes pointed daggers in the Doctor's direction. He took a surreptitious step backward.

Falsten raised a hand, silencing his men. 'You want to repeat that.'

The Doctor looked into Falsten's eyes and knew his life was resting on a knife's

edge. Literally.

The Doctor adopted his best Henry V pose. 'I freed you all because I'm not fond

of slavery, I don't like seeing people in chains. And if the Doctor was here right

now, I'm pretty sure he'd be very angry with me for taking the moral high ground.

But there you have it. I can't help myself, I have these sudden fits of idealism

wherein I go and jeopardise everything.

'But the thing is, I've given you all something that was taken away from you so

long ago. I've given you the ability to make a choice, whether that be to leave this chamber, or slice open my throat because you don't like my coat, or to rescue the

girl, defeat the Baron and save the entire universe from total and utter destruction!

'So, what do you think? The choice is absolutely yours.'

Silence descended upon the chamber.

8.34am

The Doctor, Falsten and eight mercenaries materialised in the Baron's base. They

found themselves behind a convenient row of wooden crates.

Falsten quickly surveyed the warehouse. 'There's about thirty men,' he said,

charging his blaster. 'Most of 'em are concentrated around the centre.'

The Doctor took a sneak peek at their surroundings. The warehouse was a

massive, open space, with a high ceiling that seemed to go on forever. The Doctor

marvelled at the technological expertise involved in digging this far underground,

right below the manor house. About thirty yards ahead, directly in front of him, a

group of men milled around. Some were sleeping, others were playing cards, a

few were cleaning their weapons.

Each wall was lined with crates of varying sizes, most of which were still

unopened. The few that were, revealed plenty of foam padding and the type of

ancient artefacts that could obliterate worlds, subjugate whole populations and

look really pretty with the right floral arrangement.

100

To his right, the Doctor saw a flight of stairs leading to a second-floor gantry.

That's where the Baron's laboratory was; that's where he needed to be.

He turned back to see that Falsten's men had started crawling around the

perimeter of the warehouse, using the crates and shadows as cover.

Falsten remained beside the Doctor.

'I don't suppose you could try real hard and not kill —'

The Doctor's voice was drowned out by a barrage of blaster fire.

8.36am

`Hello!' The holographic projection, ten inches tall and flickering slightly, that had just popped into existence before the Doctor's nose smiled. 'I'm so happy you

could make it. You must be Professor Smith.'

Energy bolts were buzzing around in all directions, and Falsten was doing his

best to return fire.

And you must be the Baron.' The Doctor dove to his right as the crate he'd been

hiding behind was vaporised. Like an annoying fly, the Baron followed him. 'It

seems you had fair warning that we'd make an appearance.'

'Oh, dear me, didn't you know? Didn't the Doctor work it out for himself?' The

Baron covered his mouth and giggled. 'There's been a spy amongst his ranks from

the very beginning, telling me everything. The only thing that came as a surprise

was your appearance. Are you a Time Lord as well? Having two Time Lords on my

case would do wonders for my fragile ego.'

The Doctor crawled behind a crate, keeping his head as low as possible. If his

other self had known about this little trap, he hadn't made the information

available when their minds had linked. 'Time Lords? Never heard of them.'

'Oh, you're such a horrible liar.' The Baron grinned. 'You wouldn't happen to

know a Charlotte Pollard?'

'Why? What have you done with her?'

'I' m extracting her memories as we speak,' the Baron sighed sadly.

'Unfortunately, the process will kill her.'

Despite his precarious situation, the Doctor boiled with outrage. Ìf you harm

even a —'

The Baron cut him off, eyes glittering with excitement. 'Would you like to meet

some friends of mine?'

A powerful, silver fist punched through the crate beside the Doctor.

The Baron giggled. 'Have fun!'

8.41am

The weapons fire had stopped.

Those who were still alive focused their attention on the silver monster that had

just burst its way through the crate, sending wood and foam padding flying in all

directions. The metal beast had a bullet-shaped head and looked like it had been

welded together by a lunatic with a soldering iron.

Seconds later, three more crates exploded, revealing a further trio of silver

monstrosities.

The Doctor stared at the one standing above him and knew, beyond a shadow of

doubt, that he should have stayed in bed this morning. Using all his dexterity, he

slid between the nearest robot's legs, dodging and weaving as it opened fire.

Thankfully, they were horrible shots, relying more on quantity than quality.

Before the Doctor could make it to Falsten's position, he suddenly felt a terrible

pain in his mind, as though someone were ripping their way through his

memories and experiences.

The heat from a scorching blaster bolt brought the Doctor to his senses. He

rallied his mental defences, then raced over to a screaming Falsten.

`What are they!'

Ì haven't a clue,' the Doctor said, catching his breath. 'But I have a plan. I need you to focus your fire on their heads when I give the signal.'

`The guns are having no damn effect!'

`Just trust me!' the Doctor yelled. 'Wait for my signal.'

Taking a deep breath, the Doctor made a dash for the closest robot. It turned in

his direction, blasting away with its energy weapon. With all the poise and grace

he could muster, he was soon within three feet of the beast. He reached into his

pocket, and withdrew a slave unit. He threw it in the direction of the robot's head.

With a pleasing clang, the device stuck in place. Shouting with joy, the Doctor

hurled two more units, each one hitting its target. Then, dancing around another

salvo of gunfire, he took out his sonic screwdriver with a flourish and activated it.

The explosion was so powerful that for a moment the Doctor feared he'd over-

compensated and killed everyone in the warehouse. When the smoke had cleared,

the robot was still standing, but stumbling around, punch-drunk.

`*Now,* Falsten!'

Blaster fire streaked across the warehouse, destroying what remained of the

robot, and the silver monster hit the concrete floor with a resounding and

satisfying crunch.

849am

The Doctor dealt with the other three robots in exactly the same way. And this time the other mercenaries joined Falsten in bringing the trio down.

In the end, there were only eight survivors. The Doctor didn't have time to dwell

on the carnage. Thinking only of Charley, he raced up the flight of stairs, burst

into the Baron's laboratory, and found her lying on the floor next to a pile of white ash. Her dress was all torn and soiled, her body had been badly burnt, the skin red and raw.

And she looked so still. So... so...

The Doctor bent over Charley, trembling fingers searching for a pulse.

And that's when he saw the note lying neatly beside her, and knew Charley was

alive.

He slipped the note into his pocket just as her eyes sprung open. 'Please don't

bury me!' she screamed.

Òh, Charley, I'd never bury you... well maybe in the sand... but only for some

fun.'

As she looked up into his face the fear and confusion faded. 'What happened to

you?'

Òh, this and that Would you like to get off this cold laboratory floor?'

The Doctor helped Charley to her feet and handed her his coat. Quickly, she

draped it over her shoulders.

`What happened to that?' Charley was staring at the pile of ash.

Ìt was like that when I got here.' She was looking him directly in the eyes,

needing reassurance, protection, friendship. 'Come on, it's time we were going.'

Charley pulled on his coat. 'No._ something happened here... the Baron... and

the other man... and the TARDIS, where's the TARDIS?'

For a brief moment, the Doctor thought about the note in his pocket, written in

his own handwriting —

'I *treated her like my own.* But things will *only get worse.'*

— and then he decided they needed a holiday, a proper holiday, somewhere they

could eat and drink and be merry to their hearts' content without needing to worry

about getting drunk or putting on weight.

The Doctor knew the exact place.

So he took Charley by the hand, led her out of the laboratory and

tried very hard

not to think about dealing with her situation.

Because that thought scared him silly.

The Megalomaniac's Story

8.00am

The Baron came from a proud and noble line of megalomaniacs.

Over the last thousand years or so, the *de* Kay Leigh dynasty had achieved varying levels of success when it came to ruling the entire universe. At their peak, the de Kay Leigh name had been feared across the cosmos, at their worst the

family had at least ruled a small continent on a backwater planet

But this time there would be no mistakes, this time the de Kay Leigh would

claim their rightful throne over all time and space.

And the man who would see them reach this lofty goal was the Baron.

He sat in his communications room, dressed in traditional de Kay Leigh attire:

a high-collared shirt, creamy white cravat and a crimson waistcoat. On the

monitors that lined the room, Venetia/Charlotte was making a mess of a simple

mission. The girl had been conditioned to be a psychotic killer, trained in the art of stealth and breaking necks. Stealing the device should have been a breeze, and

yet here she was, racing toward Asquith Forest, a confused... no frightened...

expression on her face.

Most megalomaniacs would have been furious at the failure, but the Baron did

what he always did when he became excited.

He put his hand over his mouth and giggled.

8.05am

A voice came though the speakers.

103

m'lord

, I think you wanna come out here.' Gertner sounded excited, but then

again, he always did when dealing with the artefact.

The Baron programmed spybots Gamma III and Gamma XXX to keep track of

`Venetia'. He was a little upset at having to leave her story just as it was getting interesting, but the artefact took priority.

The communications room led straight into the main laboratory. Here the

Baron kept all his juicy discoveries — including the Ikoran artefact, the juiciest

discovery of them all.

When he'd first seen it over a month ago, the Baron had considered keeping the

artefact for himself. It was gorgeous: shaped vaguely like a chair but fashioned

from gleaming red muscle and tendon interweaved around pearly bone.

Sometimes, the Baron would stare at it and find himself remembering the special,

significant moments in his life. It always brought a tear to the eye.

A shame he had to sell it, but the artefact would go a long way to adding five or

six battle cruisers to his growing space armada.

A salivating Gertner turned to the Baron and grinned.

One of the local villagers — what was left of him — was strapped to the artefact.

The Baron watched, fascinated, as the chair slowly, expertly, stripped away

clothing, bone and flesh. What had once been a fat, dopey face had now been

reduced to a skull, coated in red slime, tufts of hair and gobbets of flesh.

The Baron did a little a jig. 'That will ***never, ever*** get boring.'

After the villager had been completely absorbed, all that remained was a small

cube the colour of mould. The Baron licked his lips with anticipation and popped

the cube into his mouth.

It dissolved the moment it touched his tongue, tasting of-

- he *has* a wife and a daughter who he *loves* very much. ***He*** remembers *seeing* his wife for the first time at the annual Armstrong Day Fair. He watched for hours as she chatted with ***her***

friend, a beautiful pink bow in ***her hair.*** He remembers her brilliant green eyes and the cute way

she wrinkled her nose whenever she laughed. And ***he so wanted*** to walk up ***to her*** and tell her how beautiful ***she*** was, but he ***was*** afraid what she might say to a big brute like him, someone who smelt of mud and pig manure.

Òh, that was so sweet,' the Baron sighed, wiping a non-existent tear from his

Lace.

`***What*** d'you see, boss?'

`Such a touching scene. If only love was a saleable commodity.'

He walked over to the chair and ran his fingers across white bone and wet

muscle. Very soon the Doctor would arrive and he was looking forward to their

tete-a-tete immensely.

And, of course, he couldn't wait to taste the Time Lord.

8.13am

According to the spybots, Venetia/Charlotte was heading back to the market

square.

Curiouser and curiouser.

Keeping one eye on developments, the Baron checked in with his spy. Ever since

8

the Doctor had arrived on the scene, he'd kept close tabs on Falsten and his posse.

From what he could gather, the renegade Time Lord was mostly interested in the

Ikoran artefact. This thrilled the Baron no end. He was finally making ripples in

cosmic high society — those with power were beginning to notice.

According to his spy, the Doctor had just called for assistance from an associate

called professor Smith. The Baron wondered whether this might ***be*** another Time Lord. He really did hope so; it did his ego wonders to think there might be two

Time Lords trying to outwit him.

And then something caught the Baron's eye.

On the monitor, Venetia/Charlotte was standing before a market stall, talking to

its owner. She was pointing to something, something hidden in the shadows...

Bubbling with excitement, the Baron directed Gamma III to zoom in on what

the hawker was hiding.

A blue box.

The Doctor's TARDIS!

The Baron whooped with joy. Oh, what a magnificent sight to behold. And to

think that a simple village girl, all wide eyed and innocent, would stumble across

It by chance.

The Baron activated his personal communicator. 'Gainer, could you please join

me in the communications room?'

8.3oam

The Baron stared at the humming TARDIS. His fingers tingled as he caressed the

wooden exterior, mind racing with possibilities. The Baron knew that time travel

was a double-edged sword. He could go back in time and rectify all the errors of his ancestors, but that might result in a whole series of brain-twisting, mind-bending

paradoxes. The Baron wanted to rule the universe, not destroy it.

This is why it was important he capture the Doctor and put him in the chair.

When his memories were ingested, the Baron would possess the knowledge to

play safely with time.

But first there was young Charlotte. He wondered who she might be. Definitely **not** a simple villager; you could see that by her defiant glare, her bravado.

He wondered if she was somehow connected to the Doctor, or to Professor

Smith?

Finding out was going to be fascinating.

'I just met your associate, Professor Smith!' the Baron announced as he waltzed **Into** the laboratory, blaster in ***hand.*** Downstairs he could hear screams and the **crackle** of energy fire. His metal warriors were enjoying themselves.

The Doctor was kneeling beside Charlotte, his right hand resting lightly on her **Forehead.** The girl's flesh was burnt, her dress in tatters. She would, however, **mover.**

'You freed her.'

The Doctor stood, retrieving his umbrella. 'Just defusing a bomb.'

.38am

'How wonderfully cryptic of you.' The Baron pointed at the chair with his

blaster. 'Now that the artefact is vacant, I don't suppose you would take a seat?'

'Aren't you going to gloat?'

The Baron shrugged his shoulders. Ì'm really not the gloating type. I don't want

to *score* points, Doctor. I just want your memories — and your knowledge.'

The Doctor took two steps forward. 'You have no idea what you're playing with

Baron. The artefact is far more complex than you —'

A blaster bolt scorched a hole an inch away from Charlotte's nose. 'Please,

Doctor. I hate being crude, it makes me feel so dirty. But if I have to kill her, I will.'

'She's not my concern,' the Doctor said. The Baron sighed, pointed his blaster

at Charlotte's scratched and burnt face and —

'Don't!' The Doctor was suddenly between the Baron and Charlotte.

The Baron smiled. 'Please sit down, Doctor.'

Grumbling and growling, the Doctor placed his umbrella and straw hat on the

floor beside the artefact. Then with a pointed glare in the Baron's direction, he

took his seat. 'Do you need to strap me in?'

No —' the Baron's heart raced with anticipation the manacles are just for

show. Once the process starts, there is no stopping it.'

'You don't understand the forces you are dealing with.' There was genuine fear

in the Doctor's eyes.

The Baron covered his mouth and giggled.

And then he whispered the magic words.

8.42

The process was far, far quicker with the Doctor. What should have taken ten

minutes — half an hour at the most — took no time at all.

The Doctor bellowed, screamed and whimpered as the artefact ripped away his

clothes. It then peeled away flesh to reveal muscle, tendons and bone. The Baron

was fascinated by the Doctor's two hearts, caught mid beat as they were absorbed

into the chair.

Seconds after the artefact swallowed the Doctor's skeleton it regurgitated a

mouldy-looking cube.

As the explosions and weapons fire roared on downstairs, the Baron picked up

the small cube. He closed his eyes, raised it to his lips and whispered a prayer to his ancestors, promising them that time and space would kneel before the glory of

the de Kay Leigh name.

The Baron placed the cube on his tongue — briefly tasted the impossible — and

suddenly realised what a fool he had been.

Hello, said a voice in his head.

The Baron stumbled, surprised by the intrusion. 'What... how...'

You *reused* to *listen* to me, the Doctor said.

'But the process worked.'

Yes, but only at its most basic *level.* The *artefact was designed* for minds far more intricate *and* subtle than yours. A mind like mine, for example. You assumed *the* artefact *was* for *interrogations.* It isn't. Yes, it extracts memories and *even rewrites* identities, *but only* for 1o6

therapeutic purposes. The Ikorans ***were very keen*** on mental health; not surprising considering **that *the*** population ***was prone to bouts of***

insanity. So they ***used*** the therapy chair to either remove troublesome memories, which they ***would*** then modify, or ***create a new*** identity that

was a little less mad.

'But the artefact kills people.'

Not at all. You simply haven't finished the process. A template of my body still ***exists*** within the matrix of ***the*** chair. Look, let me show you.

Without warning, the Baron found himself uttering a complex series of alien

instructions, similar to those he'd used to activate the chair.

Oh, ***yes,*** sorry... ***I also have complete control of your*** body. Don't worry, I'll be discreet.

Helpless to intervene, the Baron watched the reconstruction of the Doctor.

Layer by layer, from grey skeleton to brown blazer.

The Baron couldn't hide his excitement. 'That was simply amazing!'

'Yes.' The Doctor stood, brushing small fragments of bone from his trousers.

'Unfortunately all those poor villagers whose memories you extracted are dead.'

'Couldn't we resurrect them in the same fashion?'

'Oh, yes.' The Doctor's eyes were dark, menacing. 'But they would be lifeless

husks. You ingested their essence.'

'As I did yours.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'No, what you swallowed was a partial copy. More

than enough to control your mind. Now, if you could please sit down.'

The Baron struggled against the compulsion to sit, but it was like a

child

throwing punches at a prize fighter. 'When did you have time to make the copy?'

he asked.

'While you chatted to Professor Smith, I saved Charlotte and reprogrammed the

chair to produce the copy.'

'You knew about Begleiter, didn't you?'

'Your spy? Oh, yes.' The Doctor popped his straw hat onto his head. 'He gave

you a false sense of security, made you think you held all the cards.' The Doctor

grinned. 'First lesson in defeating a megalomaniac: make him think he has the

upper hand.'

The Baron's lower lip trembled. 'I worked so hard. I did all this research on you,

found out you were a renegade Time Lord prone to helping out your fellow man

And what an honour it was to know that you cared enough about my activities to **get** involved.' The Baron's eyes misted over with tears. 'I'm the first de Kay Leigh **to**

Trexa

be noticed by one of the cosmic hierarchy. Not some despotic War Lord on

3, or a small-minded competitor looking to muscle in on my market share,

but someone who actually counted, someone whose name had sent shivers down

the spine of many a tyrant. And it would be my privilege to strip this

man, this **myth,** this legend of his knowledge, his memories and his power. My ancestors **would** have been so proud. But you've taken that from me. How dare you!'

'Don't you understand?' growled the Doctor. 'You were never that important. It

was never, ever about you or your desire for conquest. It was always about the artefact and about... her.' The Doctor pointed at Charlotte. 'An irresponsible act

that nearly led to the destruction of everything. You were only a pawn.'

`Please... please, I'm not a pawn... I...'

The Baron's voice trailed off; there was nothing left to say. All that work, all that planning, all that scheming and killing and conquering. The dreams and the

dreams of his family crushed under the heel of this little man's brown brogues.

From downstairs there was a massive explosion which rocked the laboratory,

causing some equipment to topple over.

The Doctor leaned on his umbrella, a smile spreading across his face. 'Now,

before I destroy the artefact, I think Armstrong's Colony deserves a benevolent

leader, don't you?'

The Baron had never felt so frightened in his life. He struggled against the force

holding him to the chair. He screamed and cried and whimpered and bellowed

and pleaded. But the Doctor whispered the magic words and the Baron

experienced something sharp drill a hole in his mind.

In that instant ofpain he saw his ancestors standing around him. Each one wore

a cream cravat, a gold pin bearing the crest of the de Kay Leigh family. They glared at him, disgusted by his failure. He cried out for forgiveness, but they simply

turned their backs on him, disappearing in a haze of red.

And then the Baron's mind was besieged by kinder, gentler memories,

memories of an old man sitting on a porch, sipping a hot tea, proud of his people

and his colony.

One story was over, but a brighter one was about to begin.

08

08 .52

Waiting for Jeremy

Richard Salter

There is always time for a cup of tea. The Doctor reflected as much as he pushed

open the door to the little café and shuffled inside. The place was cosy and fairly busy, with a popular song he couldn't identify playing on the radio. Most of the

tables with the blue-and-white tablecloths were occupied, and the stools at the

Formica-topped bar towards the back of the room were all taken. Selecting one of

only two free tables, with seating for two near the window, he leaned his cane

against one chair and eased himself into the other, making an obvious show of

gazing at the street outside, watching the bustling people go by.

He had noticed her immediately of course. You didn't get to his age without

spotting straight away when someone was staring at you. He risked a glance in her

direction, pretending to admire the paintings for sale by local artists. Yes, she was definitely looking at him.

A waitress came over, said hello and took his tea order. When she had moved

away, the Doctor decided to catch the eye of his elderly admirer. When he did so,

he expected her to look away, embarrassed. Instead she held his gaze, her face

open and hopeful, her eyes a deep and captivating blue.

Was she looking for signs of recognition? The Doctor had met many people on

his travels — many, many people — but he was fairly sure he had never seen her

before. She was probably in her early seventies, grey hair and with a face not yet

completely robbed of its beauty by time. He saw gentleness in her eyes, and much

regret. She intrigued him. Surprisingly, she stood up and came over to him. How

forward the women of this time period could be! Even those of more advanced

years. He stood as a courtesy when she reached his table.

She smiled pleasantly and asked, 'Are you Jeremy?'

The Doctor chuckled. 'My dear lady, I fear you have mistaken me for somebody

else.'

She seemed profoundly disappointed and... something else: resigned?

Ì'm so sorry,' she said. 'I hope I didn't disturb you.'

`Madam, you did no such thing. That's quite all right. Quite all right.' The

Doctor reached over and retrieved his cane from the other chair. 'Please, sit down, my dear. You seem so lonely sitting all by yourself.'

She seemed hesitant, her eyes flicking to the door and back again as if afraid to

let it out of her sight for more than a moment. Realising that if she sat with him

she would have her back to the entrance, the Doctor stepped aside and offered her

his seat. She seemed much more at ease with this arrangement, thanking him. The

Doctor took the opposite chair and together they sat down.

`May I buy you a cup of tea?' the Doctor asked, but she shook her head. 'I'm the

Doctor. And you are?'

`Maggie,' she replied, her eyes darting to the door every so often. 'Maggie

Baxter.'

`Delighted to meet you. And who might this Jeremy person be, if you don't

mind my asking?' The Doctor realised it was perhaps an inappropriate question,

but his curiosity was piqued and she seemed happy for the opportunity to tell her

story.

From her handbag she took a crumpled envelope, brown with age and torn at

one corner. She opened it gingerly and extracted a letter, the single sheet of paper in an equally sad state. She handed it to the Doctor and, as he carefully unfolded

it, she explained what it was.

Ìn 1952 an American soldier was briefly stationed here before he was sent out

to Korea,' she explained, her eyes darting between the Doctor and the door. 'We

fell in love, and he promised me that when the war was over he would come back

and we would be together.' Her eyes dropped to the letter in the Doctor's hands.

He took the hint and began to read. Dated 26 July 1953, from Seoul, South Korea,

it read:

My Dearest Maggie,

The war is nearly over, they say, and soon we will be together. I

don't have much time, but know that I love you and will see you

soon. Meet me in the China Rose Cafe for breakfast when I

return and I promise never to leave you again.

All my love,

Jeremy

`You see the problem?' she asked when the Doctor had finished reading.

Hmm, yes. Yes indeed. In his haste, it seems young Jeremy forgot to include the

date on which he intended to meet you here. Yes, well, bless my soul. That is most

unfortunate.'

`So every day since then, I've come to this cafe for breakfast and waited for him.'

`Goodness me! This is the China Rose Cafe?'

`Well, not any more. It's had many names since the fifties. In fact, for a while

there in the eighties, it was a pool hall.'

Ànd you mean to tell me you've been coming here every single morning for over

fifty years, waiting for a man who is clearly never going to arrive? Why didn't you give up long ago?'

Ì don't have a good answer for that, Doctor. After a while it just became habit.

After the first few weeks of waiting, I think I wanted him to walk through that

door just so I could yell at him. After that, I think I just got it into my head that the day I missed coming here would be the day he turned up. Now it's habit. I can't

start my *day in* any other way than coming here. You know how one gets into a routine, surely?'

The Doctor made noises ofagreement. 'Oh, yes, my *dear*. I know all too well the **112**

dangers of routine. It took me a good deal of time before I was able to break out of my humdrum existence and start doing what I had always hoped to do.'

'And what's that, Doctor?' She appeared desperate for inspiration and a way out.

`Why, exploring of course! I am a traveller.' He tapped a finger against his lower lip in thought. 'You know, you could come with me, leave this café, come and see the wonders of the world. It's

not too late for you to choose a new direction.'

For a moment he thought she would say yes. How wonderful to share his ship

with a more mature individual. Steven was a fine companion, but he had the

impetuousness of youth that could be most frustrating at times. What a change to have someone to play chess with, or with whom he could listen to opera.

But then he saw the light in her eyes fade away and she seemed to become

*mailer in her chair.

'You're wrong, Doctor. I'm too old to go gallivanting about. I'm not in the

greatest of health. Someday soon I'm not even going to be able to make it down

the road to the cafe any more.' She sighed heavily. 'But thanks for the offer,

Doctor. It's tempting.'

'Well, what about family? Don't you have children? A husband?

'I've devoted my life to one man, Doctor. There's been nobody else. I never

married, no children, my career never went anywhere because I could never work

regular hours. My life is one big regret, I'm sorry to say.'

'Did you ever try to find out what happened to Jeremy?

'Of course. I never met any of his fellow servicemen while he was here, but I

tried to track him down once the war ended. To be honest, I suspect he gave me a false name so that I wouldn't be able to trace him when he returned to the States, probably because he already had a wife waiting for him there.' The Doctor raised in

eyebrow at this. Ìm more of a realist than you think, Doctor. I've considered all the options. Many nights I've lain awake, picturing his broken body lying in a ditch somewhere. Maybe he was killed after writing that letter, just before the war ended or even afterwards before *news* of the ceasefire spread.' She closed her eyes end he noticed her shiver.

The Doctor changed the subject after that. It turned out that she possessed a

love for literature, in particular the works of Tolstoy and Dickens. For the next twenty minutes they chatted about Master and Man, before the Doctor realised the time and made his excuses. He was late for meeting Steven and the young man

would probably be overreacting, automatically assuming that the Doctor was in

some sort of trouble.

'It was truly a pleasure to meet you, Maggie,' the Doctor told her before he left.

'I hope you find your Jeremy some day.'

'But we must do something, Doctor!' Steven was standing beside the TARDIS, his

Inns folded, that stubborn look on his face that told the Doctor another

confrontation was inevitable.

offered her the chance to accompany us but she declined. I fail to see what else we can do!' He was beginning to regret relaying Maggie's story to his determined young companion, but the tale had touched him and he had felt the need to

discuss it with a friend. He should have known that Steven would want to do more

than was permitted by the laws of time.

`Doctor, this is a time machine. We can go back and change things, make them

better for her.'

The Doctor grasped his lapels and raised himself to his full height 'Absolutely

out of the question, young man. I forbid it!'

`We have a chance to help her and just sitting here doing nothing isn't right.'

Òn the contrary, it isn't right to interfere in history.'

Ìf this was some well-documented historical event I'd agree with you. But

Doctor, this is the life of one woman. It's an isolated case. Besides, we certainly interfered between humans and the Omwanar.'

The Doctor had to admit he had a point, though he was loathe to say so out loud.

In the end, he gave a theatrical sigh and said, 'Very well, young man, if you wish to engage on this fool's errand then I shall not stand in your way.'

Will you fly the TARDIS back to 1953?'

`Yes, yes, my boy. Now, do hurry inside. I have many precise calculations and

course settings to make before we can take off.'

Steven grinned, no doubt delighted to be getting his way for once. But as he

stepped into the ship the Doctor mused that he probably would have ended up

helping anyway. Such a tragic waste of an intelligent life, spent waiting for a man who would never turn up.

Not for the first time in recent weeks, Steven found himself impersonating a

military officer. This time he wore the uniform of an American soldier from the

195os: light green T-shirt with a darker green jacket, trousers and cap. It was the best he and the Doctor had managed to throw together from the TARDIS's

wardrobe.

Technically he should have been wearing dress uniform, but from his own years

of service he knew how to hold himself and how to act, and these things were

ninety per cent attitude anyway. What he was about to do would be hard, no

question about that, but it was for the best. He didn't relish the reaction he was

about to receive.

The café was small, with a faded sign above the door that read China Rose Cafe.

Inside there were a handful of people having breakfast, some sat on stools at the

bright red bar towards the back of the establishment, others in booths set at

regular intervals by the windows and along the centre of the room. A song was

playing on the radio, a woman singing about the cost of an animal in a shop

window. It wasn't familiar to Steven but it had a catchy tune.

A young woman rose to her feet almost instantly as he entered. She was young,

perhaps early twenties, very beautiful with long blonde hair tied into a ponytail

and the most intense blue eyes. She wore a knee-length blue skirt and ruffled

white blouse, and her figure and beauty were certainly easy on the

eye.

Steven was wearing a solemn expression, and she obviously picked up on that

straight away. Her hand went to her mouth, and as she hurried towards him she

bumped into a chair but barely noticed.

`Maggie Baxter?' Steven asked as she drew to a halt in front of him. She was a

good foot shorter than him. Tears were already springing to her eyes.

`Yes,' she croaked. She cleared her throat and tried again. 'Yes, yes, that's me.'

Ì'm afraid I have some bad news.'

Maggie dropped to her knees. She was sobbing openly now, and everyone else

in the café had noticed. They watched her, not knowing how to react, trying to

decide whether they should keep a polite distance and not interfere, or whether

they should rush forward and comfort the stricken girl.

Steven delivered his speech as sympathetically as he could. He knew she had

stopped listening, but he had to deliver the whole thing. He told her that Jeremy

was killed in Korea one day before he was due to be sent home. Mortally wounded

in an attack by North Korean terrorists protesting the signing of the treaty that

very same day, Jeremy was taken to a hospital in Seoul. Unfortunately he did not

recover, but before he died, he had asked Steven to come to this cafe and let

Maggie know that he would not be able to keep his promise to meet her here.

Ì'm so very sorry, Miss Baxter. Jeremy loved you very much and you were his first

concern when he was wounded.' He crouched down and placed a hand on

Maggie's shoulder as she shook with emotion. Until now he had been undecided

whether or not to add the final lie, but to make this convincing he was going to

have to go through with it. It was killing him to see the effect of his words.

`Maggie.' He placed a hand on her cheek and lifted her head until he was

looking into her teary eyes. 'Jeremy saved my life. He took a bullet that was meant for me. He's a hero.'

She didn't answer, just descended into more tears as he let her go. She folded

into a small ball on the floor, and now other people stepped forward to try to

comfort her. Steven left them to it, backing away, largely ignored now as he left the cafe. He didn't look back; to do so would have broken his heart still further. He

had fought and won his argument with the Doctor; this is what he had wanted. He

had known it wasn't going to be easy, but was determined to do the right thing.

Seeing her face and her reaction was enough to make him believe that he had

accomplished the opposite to what he had intended. perhaps he had

destroyed a

life rather than changed it for the better.

He strolled towards the TARDIS. There outside it stood the Doctor, his

expression grim, one hand clasping his lapel, the other atop his cane.

`Well? How did it go?'

Às well as can be expected,' Steven replied, reluctant to give more details.

`How did she take the news?'

Steven rounded on him, angry now. 'How do you think she took it?'

`Now, now, calm down. There's no need to take that tone with me. I need to

know if she believed you, that's all. It's very important.'

`Yes, she believed me. Can we return to 2005 now?'

`Yes. Of course, my boy, I'll certainly do my best.'

When the TARDIS materialised, it was Steven who opened the doors and made to

leave.

`Just where do you think you're going, hmm?' the Doctor called to him,

stopping him in his tracks.

Ì' m going to find out if it worked, of course.'

`No, you cannot go. She may recognise you!'

Òh, come on, Doctor. Fifty years have passed since she last saw me.'

The Doctor wagged a finger at him. 'Nevertheless we cannot take the risk. I

must go!'

`But, Doctor, what time is it?'

The Doctor hunched over the console and read the local time from a read-out.

Ìt's twenty minutes to ten o'clock,' he replied. 'I fail to see why that is significant.'

`What time did you first meet her?'

`Well, now, let me see. I'd say it was just before nine o'clock in the morning. Yes, I think that's it.'

Ìn that case you've already met her today. Won't it be strange if you go back and

this time everything's changed?'

There was a twinkle in the Doctor's eye. 'That's just its Things have changed

now. Our original meeting probably never happened, and if it did it would have

been quite different.'

Steven shook his head. 'I don't understand.'

Ìt's complicated, my boy, but I can't wait to see the results.'

`So I have to wait here?'

Ì think that's for the best'

•

Steven didn't reply, but he watched the Doctor leave with trepidation, wishing

he could be the one to find out if his heartbreaking plan had succeeded.

The Doctor pushed open the door to the cafe and found it to be much the same as

the last time he was here. Fewer people than before, some having a morning

coffee, others a late breakfast_ A different song on the radio this time, some other infernal racket popular with the youngsters.

With a heavy heart, the Doctor glanced to the corner and saw Maggie still sitting

by the window, just as she had been before. She'd noticed him too and she stood

up. This time the Doctor came over to her, but it was clear that she didn't

remember him from earlier that morning. He introduced himself; telling her that

he had been tipped off that she would be here and that he was interested in hearing her story for an article he was writing.

She seemed a little disappointed. No doubt she had hoped he would turn out to

be Jeremy. But her manners took over and she flashed him a thin smile. 'Oh, I see.

Well, please, have a seat.'

`Thank you, my dear.' The waitress came over and the Doctor ordered a pot of

tea. 'Now,' he said, returning his attention to Maggie, 'tell me, why is it that a

lovely lady such as yourself should be sitting in this cafe all alone watching the

door for a gentleman, perhaps around my age, to enter?'

Ì' m waiting for Jeremy,' she replied.

Ah, I see. And who is this Jeremy.'

Maggie reached into her handbag, withdrew the familiar battered envelope and

handed it to him. 'Jeremy was an American soldier who was briefly

stationed here

in 1952 before serving in Korea. We fell very much in love, and he promised when

the war was over we would be together.' She glanced at the envelope in the

Doctor's hands, and he made a show of removing the letter inside, carefully

unfolding it and reading the contents. When he had finished, Maggie continued.

`He forgot to tell me a date, so I started coming here every morning. Then, a week

later, a young soldier came to see me in this cafe. Well, it was called the China Rose Café back then. He told me that Jeremy had died in Korea just a day after writing

the letter, the day the war ended.'

Òh, my dear, such terrible *news.* You must have been terribly upset.'

Before she could answer, the waitress brought over their order. The Doctor

thanked her and began to pour out the tea.

Ì was devastated, as you can imagine,' continued Maggie. 'The soldier said

some nice things though, like that Jeremy was a war hero and had died talking

about me. But it didn't help. It took me months to get over it, and I couldn't stop myself from coming to this cafe every morning to wait for him, just in case there'd been a mistake or, by some miracle, Jeremy had survived. But I knew it was

hopeless.'

`So, tell me, why is it that I find you sitting here in this cafe, so many years later, **still** watching the door?'

Maggie took a sip of tea. She winced slightly as it was still too hot,

and then blew gently on the surface. 'Once I calmed down and began to accept that he wouldn't

be coming, and that he was really dead, I started asking myself questions.'

Òh, yes?' prompted the Doctor. 'What sort of questions?'

`Well, something about that soldier didn't quite add up. Perhaps it was what he

was wearing, maybe it was because he couldn't have known I was coming here

every day, yet he came here to find me. Anyway, I made some enquiries. The soldier

who'd come with the message had been British, but I couldn't fimd any record of

a Jeremy serving with any unit that fought alongside British soldiers in Korea, nor **of** a Jeremy who died on the day the war ended. I couldn't work out why that might **be so** for a while, and then I hit upon the only possible explanation.'

The Doctor put down his tea. She was smart, he had to give her that. Already

suspecting what the explanation might be, he prompted her to continue anyway.

Ìt's pretty obvious to me,' she said, 'that Jeremy was not his real name. rm

guessing he already had a wife in America, and that he intended to return to her

after the war. So he asked a friend to come here and make me believe he was dead.

That way I wouldn't go making embarrassing enquiries when he never showed up.

Maybe he never intended to write a date in his letter at all, I don't know. What I do know is that the soldier's story was probably a lie and that Jeremy is probably still alive and living with his family in America.'

`That's as maybe,' the Doctor agreed, impressed at her deduction, 'but you've

not answered my question. Why do you still wait for him, especially if he lied to

your

`Because one day he might change his mind and decide to come back to me, and

if he does I need to be somewhere I know he can find me.'

`How could you take him back, knowing that he lied to you?'

Ì never stopped loving him, Doctor. At first I waited because I might have been

wrong. After a time, I became so angry that the only way I could cope was with the

routine. I have no idea what I would have done if Jeremy had walked through that

door during that time. Eventually, coming here became routine to the point where

I just couldn't stop. I built my life and my dreams around that man, Doctor. I regret so much what I've missed out on — I had so many plans. Where did the time go?'

Soon after that the Doctor left her. She said she would have to head off to work

soon anyway, and frankly he realised there was very little else he could do.

Although he rarely bandied about words like destiny, perhaps in this case poor

Maggie was truly fated, locked in a lifetime of waiting instead of a lifetime of

achieving her obvious potential. Such a shame, such a great shame.

As the Doctor could have predicted, Steven was not happy with the outcome.

The headstrong young man stood with his mouth agape when he found out what

effect, or lack of, their meddling had ended up having on Maggie's life.

`Was it my fault?' he asked. Was my performance not convincing enough?

Perhaps we should go back again, try changing something else.'

Ì think such an action would be most foolhardy. Do you not think we have

interfered enough? I *warned* you what might happen if we tried to change history.

Be grateful our meddling did not have a far more disastrous impact.'

Steven was clearly unhappy, but he didn't try to push the point any further. The

Doctor stood motionless, resolute. The boy could see he wasn't going to get his

way this time. Of course, the Doctor should not have indulged the young man in

the first place, but now was not the time for such an admission. Now was the time

to leave well alone.

`My dear boy, it's time to move on. I don't exactly relish the life poor Maggie has been left with any more than you do. But we mustn't make things worse by

meddling further. There's just no future in it.'

10.10

A Life in the Day

Xanna Eve Chown

`There's a breathless hush in the close tonight,' muttered the Doctor, rummaging

around under the console. He stood up and grinned, patting the stick of celery in

his lapel. His hand hovered over the flashing buttons in front of him for a moment

before he pressed a green one and turned to face Peri.

`What are you talking about, Doctor?' she asked, peering at the expanse of blue

sky on the scanner. 'It's not even lunchtime yet. Oh, and it's lovely and sunny. I

don't even need a jacket.' She sighed happily. The TARDIS had landed across the

road from the grassy triangle of a village green, framed on all sides by neat brick buildings. At the nearest corner, two children were playing on the steps of a small stone cross, erected to the memory of local men lost in two world wars. On the far

side of the green, people were bustling about, unloading bric-a-brac onto wooden

trestle tables and hanging brightly coloured flags across the entrances of large

canvas tents.

Ì told you we'd come back,' said the Doctor, 'and in plenty of time too.' He was

looking extremely pleased with himself. Ìf I remember correctly, the match starts

at noon, so we've got a couple of hours to kill. Probably best to find a nice shady spot to watch from. Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday —' He

stopped as Peri laughed. 'What?'

`You're full of it today!' she said.

`Full of what?' asked the Doctor, indignantly.

`Quotation, of course,' said Peri.

The Doctor raised his hat to her in mock salute. 'Well, I am in a rather good

mood. I was upset that we couldn't take up the Brigadier's invitation last time. A

ftte worse than death.' He chuckled. 'But we did have pressing business elsewhere.

Then I thought, why not? I made a careful note of the coordinates... and here we

are. Well done, old girl!' He patted the top of the TARDIS console. 'Oh, I am

looking forward to this.' He offered an arm to Peri. 'Shall we?' The pair stepped

out onto the warm pavement.

`So the last time we were here it was... yesterday?' asked Peri. 'It seems like

weeks ago.'

`Four to be precise, from our point of view,' replied the Doctor. 'It's been a long month since yesterday.'

Ìs that the Beatles?'

Ì'm not quoting any more.' The Doctor waited for a bicycle to pass, then

stepped off the kerb. 'Come on, Peri. I think the refreshment tent is already up.'

There was no pavement on the opposite side of the road. The grass was trimmed

In a straight line, butting neatly up to the tarmac. A shallow ditch ran the length of **121**

the green, with stone blocks at intervals making unnecessary bridges. The Doctor ignored one and stepped over the dip, shading his eyes to see the distant tents and stalls as he ticked them off against a mental checklist.

`Coconut shy,' he said. 'White elephant, hook-a-duck, bouncy castle, tea tent.

Perfect.' He started to stride in the direction of the music that drifted towards them from the other side of the green.

`Wait up,' called Peri. Her shoes weren't really up to it, but she managed to jump across the ditch and set off after him. She hadn't taken more than two or three

steps when a noise hit her. 'Doctor,' she gasped. The sound was so sharp that her eyesight blurred and she stumbled, clutching at her ears. But it stopped as

suddenly as it had started. She looked at the Doctor, who was crouched down on

one knee, holding a hand over his eyes. Peri carefully let go of her ears and gave her head a slight shake from side to side. 'Doctor, are you okay? What happened?'

The Doctor stood up, blinking. 'Did you hear it too, Peri?'

`Yes, what was it?'

Ì don't know. Not human, but not a machine either. Definitely a sentient being.

And somehow the pitch seemed familiar. I think it was trying to say something to me.

`Like what?' Peri asked. The Doctor looked uncomfortably away, scratching at

the back of his neck. 'Doctor?'

He hummed, avoiding her eyes. 'I don't know exactly,' he said, 'but I've heard

that sort of tone before.'

`Come on, Doctor, you're scaring me.' Peri grabbed at his arm,

forcing him to

look at her.

Òh, very well,' he said, sighing. Ì think it was trying to... how shall I put this?

It sounded rather like it was saying "you stupid, stupid man".'

Two old ladies carrying a Tupperware box of cakes in the direction of the fete

glanced at them, disapprovingly. Peri let go of the Doctor's arm.

Ì couldn't hear any words,' she said. 'Maybe it was just one of the stalls testing their loudspeakers.'

Timm?' Her companion shook his head. `No, no. There were definitely words.'

Ì guess it's just that great Time Lord sense of hearing then, hey? All I could hear was white noise.'

Any attempt at sarcasm was lost on the Doctor. He was deep in thought.

`Something was trying to communicate with us. And it must have been

important. But I couldn't make out the words. They were just too fast.' He shook one hand excitedly. 'Which means I just need to find a way to slow the sounds

down so we can understand them.'

`Why d'you want to work out what it was saying?' exclaimed Peri. 'It hurt! And

where was it, anyway? Hiding in the trees? Under a tent? That's creepy. Why

doesn't it want to be seen?'

The Doctor held up a hand. 'Come on, Peri. Where's your sense of adventure?

Of course we have to find out what it was saying. It made the

effort to talk to us.

Maybe it was hiding because it was... shy.'

`Shy?' said Peri, incredulously. 'It blasts you with an alien dog whistle to tell you 122

how poorly it rates your intelligence, and you think it's shy?' The Doctor tutted, as Peri warmed to her point. 'Scaly. I bet it's scaly,' she said. 'With_ with big teeth, and a long tail...'

À crocodile, then?' asked the Doctor, raising his eyebrows. 'Really, Peri, you

must make more of an effort to understand alien races. Come on, back to the

TARDIS. I've got an idea!'

Peri and the Doctor retraced their steps back to where the TARDIS stood quietly

beside a telephone box. It looked quite at home in this village, Peri thought. But then, it *kinda* was its home, only a few decades out maybe.

Anyway, she thought with a smile, even if it had looked out of place, the paving slabs themselves would have steadfastly refused to notice. This was the sort of

place that would not allow anything untoward to happen. The little stalls and flags had a firm, quiet sense of their own importance. A proper spaceship from a comic book, all gleaming silver and sparkly lights, wouldn't have managed to take away their rightful position as centre of attraction, let alone an old-fashioned police box.

The sense of order pervaded everything, from the gravel at the roadside to the

neatly ordered hedges of the front gardens. The pub on the corner looked as cosy and respectable as the local library a few doors down. Both had hand-painted

signs offering tea or orange juice. The municipal buildings on the far side of the green looked as if they had been built to wear

bunting. Peri looked regretfully at the large white sight screens that were erected ready for the lunchtime cricket match. She didn't want to go back to the TARDIS. She wanted to pay ten pence for an orange juice and watch the game.

In the console room, Peri watched the Doctor piece together several thick, flat wires and run them through a little box, forming a long loop at one end that fed back into a tiny microphone.

`This should slow the voice down and change the pitch,' he said, hanging it

round his neck. 'And this will pick it up so that you can hear it too.' He held out a separate loop for Peri to put over her head. 'But you know what they say... You

never know until you try. Now!' The TARDIS doors swung open again. He pointed

the device in the direction of the fête and stepped out into the sunshine. This time, the blast of noise was immediate. And twice as loud.

Ìt's still too fast,' said the Doctor, picking himself up from the pavement. 'But I can fix that, and lower the frequency too.'

`You better,' said Peri. 'I don't think I can cope with that again.'

The Doctor took a tiny screwdriver from his pocket and undid the back of the

black box. He readjusted some of the wires, and tightened a few of the copper coils Inside. 'There,' he said, holding it up again. Peri braced herself for the noise, but It didn't come. Instead, a sharp hiss of air curled through the loop around her neck and vibrated against her throat. Then she heard a voice.

`You again!' It spoke very quickly with a slight scrape, Peri thought, like the screech you get when you fast-forward a cassette with the play button still pressed.

Ì knew you'd come back to the scene of the crime, but to make me wait this long...'

The voice grated inside her skull, making her wince.

`You can hear it then?' asked the Doctor. 'Good.' He stuck a finger in one ear and

waggled it slightly. Erm ... can you tell where it's coming from?'

Ìnside my head,' said Peri, looking around for anything unusual.

`What's it talking about anyway?' asked the Doctor, indignantly. 'Scene of the

crime. What crime? And what does it mean, this long? We've been here less than an

hour, and I've spent most of that time making this thing so that I can actually hear it!'

`Where are you?' challenged peri. 'Come out so we can see you.'

The device around her neck spat and crackled again.

`Shh, Peri,' said the Doctor, suddenly. 'Stay still and don't move.'

Peri froze.

`What did it say?'

Ì think it was, "I'm standing on your foot."'

Òh!' She couldn't help moving. Jumping back, she shook her feet out in front

of her. 'Get it off me!' The Doctor crouched down slowly, staring at a spot near

Peri's sandal. 'How — big — are you?'

`You don't need to talk to the daisies.' The voice was definitely annoyed. It

sounded like it was on helium gas. 'I sat on your foot for longer than you could

possibly imagine, waiting to see if you'd notice. Then I moved up here.' There was

absolutely no way of telling where the sound was coming from.

Ùp where?'

The hiss reverberated through the loop for a fraction of a second before it

answered.

`How ridiculously slow you are. Your sun takes a lifetime to revolve just once

around your planet. People deliberate for days before taking one footstep. Did you

know that in the time it took you to ask that, I calculated my answers to the next

few questions you might ask me? If it's all right with you —' there was no pause to see if it was `— I'll answer them now. Otherwise I may well be dead before you

actually get round to asking them. I'm not young you know, I'm nearly

`Years?' asked the Doctor.

`Hours.'

The Doctor and Peri glanced at each other.

`You see what I mean? Questions like that just take up so much time! Oh, it's fine

for you up there, asking whatever you like. But I can't ask you anything back, can

I? I'd have to wait months *for* an answer, *and* quite frankly, I might have forgotten the question by then. Or, I suppose, I could learn the question in several new

languages to make the time pass? Translate the question into music, then

compose an operetta with the answer running through it as a recurring motif?

That would give me something to do, instead of just standing here waiting for a

reply. Although, I suppose if there's one thing I've learned on this planet, it's

patience.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow.

Now, I hope you're listening, because I'm not going to repeat this.' The words

rattled off like rapid fire. 'My name is Ba, my race is Arix. I am approximately one-1 24

3o,000th your height, and therefore invisible to the human eye. My eyes are green, my favourite colour is blue, I am 21 hours old. Anything else?'

`Yeah. Why are you so grouchy?' asked Peri.

'Peri!' warned the Doctor. She shrugged. In the distance, the village church rang the hour. Eleven o'clock. A strange spitting noise shook the device. It sounded like the creature *was* singing.

`Twenty-one, eh?' asked Peri. 'I guess that means you can legally drink.'

An irritated hiss came from the machine. 'I'm 22...'

`But you said —'

Ìn the time it took you to think up your witty riposte, I've had a birthday, not that you care. Didn't have time to get a present? Oh, but please don't bother now. Ifyou go out to buy something, it'll take you several years to choose it. And by the time you actually hand it over, another three birthdays will have passed.' It sighed

bitterly. 'Civilisations rise and fall in the time it takes you to make up your mind.'

The Doctor frowned. `Ba — just so I can get some kind of perspective. What is

the, ah, life expectancy of an Arix?'

Òh, that's a nice question. Hoping I'm on the way out, too? Twenty-four hours,

almost to the second, speaking in Earth time. I've worked out and memorised

most of the time conversion tables for this planet. Gives me something to do. Do you want me to tell you in dog months? Or caterpillar minutes?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'But this is very interesting, Peri,' he said. 'No

wonder he feels frustrated. Can you imagine how slow our voices must sound to

him? I'm surprised he can hear anything we say, the words must be so drawn out.'

He stopped and thought for a moment. Ìf his life span is as he says, that means

he's about 65 years old. So, every hour that passes for us is about eight years for

***him.* That's approximately... one year every eight minutes or so.' The Doctor took**

• deep breath in and blew it out again. `Ba, listen. Just one question. What are you doing here?'

Ì told you weeks ago not to ask any questions, then you deliberate, and

deliberate and come up with — a question!' sparked the alien, furiously. 'And you want my life story? It's far too long to tell you now. I'm not as young as I was a few minutes ago, am I? But then, it's been so long since I've had anyone to talk to.'

There was another scratch and squeak. 'I'll tell you in pictures, it's quicker. But I can't start a telepathic link of such magnitude without the permission of the

occupant of the brain. Just say yes or no. I'll go and have a nap while I'm waiting

***for* your answer, this is going to be incredibly tiring for me.'**

`Yes, then.' The Doctor gestured to Peri to sit on the wooden bench at the side

of the road. A brass plaque read 'In memory of Leonard Burfield, who loved this

walk.'

`Please do,' said Peri. 'All this screeching. I could do with a rest.'

There was a tinny gasp that sounded a little like a yawn. Àh, that's better. And don't think I won't be sending the images to you too, young lady.'

***Peri* gazed longingly over at the other side of the green. The bunting, never really something she had an affinity with before, was beginning to look incredibly welcoming. Three small children ran laughing towards the ditch at the side of the** 125

road. One, holding a brightly coloured balloon, tripped and sprawled on the

grass. The others stopped, waiting to see if he would cry.

`Ready?' asked the angry little voice. Peri looked down at her feet, and the device around her neck went quiet.

As abruptly as the noise stopped hissing through the loop, it reappeared inside

Peri's head, accompanied by a jittery flash of light, blinking on and off. It made

her feel a little squeamish. The image was like an itch that wasn't there. She felt like it was projected on a screen behind her eyes, but it was as if her eyes were

turned round inside her head at an impossible angle to look backwards and up.

She was trying to find a place to see something her eyes couldn't possibly focus

on? Urgh! The light was jigging around, impossibly fast.

That's me! came Ba's scratchy thought.

Can't you stay still? Peri thought crossly.

I' m hardly *moving.* If I *were moving any slower, I'd be asleep.*

She could feel the effort as Ba tried to slow himself down, until she could just

make out a shape, shaking from side to side. For a second the image became

clearer, but all she could see were tiny pinpricks of purple and blue light. Then

they blurred as it raced off again in a streak of white.

I'm starting the story now.

Peri's head hurt as new impressions crowded in. It was like watching a speeded-

up film where everything was the wrong size, cut with dizzying drops and swirls.

She couldn't even make out if she was thinking in pictures or words.

An enormous red ball is *speeding* through the stars. The generation ship carrying the entire Arix race.

Wow, how big is that? thought Peri. Immediately, a cricket ball floated over the

impression. It was slightly bigger than the spaceship. She suppressed a smile.

The ship is travelling in search of a *new home.* It lands *on the* Earth *when Ba is only* thirty seconds old. His mother takes him outside. But something goes wrong. The ship disappears and *leaves* them behind. They wait and wait, but it doesn't come back.

How can you have such clear memories from being a baby?

His mother *tells him the* stories of his race. *His heritage. She gives* him *her memories. The* traditions of *the* Arix.

Where is she now? wondered Peri. She then shivered, feeling the

waves of

distress.

His mother dies.

There was a blood-red shudder and the pictures faded, leaving a sharp pain

stabbing the back of Peri's eyes. The Doctor was frowning too.

`That must have been exhausting for Ba,' he said, rubbing his temples 'Let's try

to talk quickly — that might help.' He flicked a switch on the loop and it hummed

into life.

`Hey, I'm sorry about your mom,' said Peri, as sympathetically as she could,

speaking faster than a cartoon character.

Ìt took a long time to get over her death,' buzzed the reply. 'I was inconsolable

for minutes. If you will excuse me, I need more rest. I'll be back in a minute.'

`Not literally, **I** suppose,' said the Doctor, turning the machine over in his hand.

'Well, I guess that explains a lot — but not quite everything.'

'Yeah, what *were* all those little purple blobs in rows?'

'His mother's memory of the Arix National Guard. Wasn't that clear? Well, I

suppose he was passing on second-hand memories. The knowledge of a race that

he only knows from his mother's stories and memories.'

'Maybe that's why it didn't all make sense,' said Peri. 'There are bits of my

childhood that I can't remember if I really remember? Or maybe I just remember

being asked if I remember...'

'Interesting, but time is of the essence here, Peri,' said the Doctor. 'Anyway, Ba's mother did her job well. I got an intensive history of the Arix there, though some

facts might not stand up to investigation. That story about his great-grandfather

rescuing the general? Smacked of fabrication.'

'I think you got a lot more out of those pictures than I did.' Peri sighed and

stood up. 'What was the bit you didn't get?'

'Where his ship went. Ba's mother didn't know, but she knew that the Arix

would never leave anyone behind like that They see the whole race as one unit. So,

what happened? Ba's spent his whole life looking for the ship, to no avail.'

'His whole life,' repeated Peri, solemnly. Then she giggled. 'Hey, that only

started at about one o'clock yesterday afternoon. His life's quest's taken him

Monday evening and most of Tuesday!' She caught sight of the Doctor's face.

'Sorry, it's not funny. But in a way... Oh, poor thing. I guess he just wants to meet some of his own kind, and that's why he's in such a bad mood.'

'It's a bit more than that,' replied the Doctor. 'From what I understood, the life

of an Arix is more of a mission. A biological function to reproduce. I think his lack **of available... erm... partners... is making him physically uncomfortable. It's a problem for** the Arix, something that's got worse over time. Especially stuck on **that ship for so** many millennia... months... since the disastrous explosion of the **star** fragment they were living on.'

'Hey, I missed that bit too!'

'It's not that he feels sad about all the time he's spent searching for his ship,

rather that he has to fulfil his biological imperative to procreate before he dies.

And being the only eligible alien on Earth, he's finding it hard. "Shame we don't bust split in half like they used to in the good old days," his mother said. Did you catch that bit? He's a little irked now that he thinks he might not get a chance.'

'Isn't he a bit old for all that now?' asked Peri, sitting down again. A vicious crackle came from the loop detector.

'I have been able to procreate from the age of four hours and will continue to be **able to** do so until I die,' came Ba's voice. 'I could've had thousands of children by Dow,' he added bitterly.

'Feeling better for that nice long rest?' the Doctor asked, speaking as quickly

and clearly as possible. 'Listen to me, Ba. I'm sorry, I really am, but I need to know what you think we can do to help? I'd never heard of the Arix before today.'

'I tried to tell you weeks ago,' Ba crackled, his voice slightly pained. 'Why do you think I've wasted all this time talking to you, waiting for your pitifully slow **127**

answers, your stupid voice? Here you are, at the scene of the crime, and you act like you don't even know

`Hang on, you said that before,' said Peri. 'What scene? What crime?' But the

loop was still humming with Ba's previous connection. He had obviously felt

refreshed enough to make a very long speech.

just as your ship landed here, I felt the presence of my ship. I tried to

communicate with you, but you just went inside...'

`To fix up this loop detector!' said the Doctor, indignantly.

• yet even now, I can hear its faint signal...'

`Really?' asked peri, excitedly leaping to her feet. 'Where is it? It's probably big enough for us to see.'

• coming from under your ship. They came back for me after all these years

and you squashed them. My entire race. That's genocide, you know.'

Peri gasped but the Doctor shook his head.

Ì'm sorry, Ba, that's impossible. There are hundreds of instruments on the

TARDIS to stop that sort of thing happening. You must be mistaken.'

Ì am not mistaken.' The loop shook with indignation. 'You think I can't feel my

own ship's signals?'

`Ba, the TARDIS doesn't squash things, this isn't The Wizard of Oz.'

Peri was walking towards the TARDIS. The door was open a crack. can you

hear the signals now?' she asked. `Do they get louder when I do this?' She pushed

the door further open.

`Yes,' quivered the voice.

`Doctor — I think Ba's ship is *inside* the TARDIS.'

The Doctor stared at the blue doors.

Ì suppose it might have slipped in at some point, but it's desperately unlikely —

oh, very well.' He stood up. `Ba, are you inside or outside? You have to stay with us.

We'll never find you if you get lost.'

The alien buzzed impatiently. Peri had no idea what he was saying. He was

becoming so excited that his voice was too fast even for the loop to pick up.

Inside the TARDIS, Peri looked at the console room with fresh eyes, scanning for

a place where a miniature spaceship could hide.

`This way!' blasted Ba, and a shock of bright blue pain hit her brain.

Òw! What did you do that for?'

`Maybe his ship is in here after all,' muttered the Doctor. 'Something's

increasing his telepathic strength. Follow the colours, Peri! I am not having that

thing loose in the TARDIS.'

Ba's telepathic markings were painful, but easy to follow down the corridors.

Peri was going as fast as she could, but the high-pitched squeaks coming from Ba

were almost unbearable.

`Hurry up. I'll go ahead and check,' Ba squealed.

Òkay.'

Ì've located the source of the signal. Just going to try to make contact.'

Òkay.'

1

`Contact made, the ship is waiting. I'll go and tell them you're on

your way.'

'Okay.'

The more Peri's head throbbed with colour the less she knew where she was.

The corridors blurred into one, and the Doctor was no help, hurrying on ahead of her. Suddenly, a wall of pain hit the centre of her skull and the voice from the loop screamed so quickly that the words blurred into one.

Ìtisinherd'

`But the door's locked,' said the Doctor. 'How could your ship get in there?'

Openthedoor

!'

The Doctor shrugged and slid the door open. Peri craned her neck to see what

was inside. Nothing would really have surprised her, she thought. A lake, a library, sure but —

The laundry room?' She rubbed her head. 'Hardly the place for a little spaceship to hide out. But then I guess we don't go in here very often. Not since we last did the laundry last month.' She gave a guilty smile, which turned to a frown. Ùh-oh...

wait a moment. If that door was shut, that means that Ba's ship didn't fly in just now. So it must have come aboard the last time we were on Earth. Which was...'

`Yesterday!' Light dawned on the Doctor at the same time. 'No wonder the ship

didn't go back for Ba's mother. We dematerialised with the ship on board.'

`But we've been away for weeks in between yesterday and today,' moaned Peri.

'Ba's generation will have been dead for thousands of years.'

One of the large, blue laundry crates gave a slight tremor. Peri rushed across the room and started to pull patterned sheets from the top, dropping them in a heap

on the floor. Something moved again, towards the bottom of the crate, bumping

against its plastic sides. There was a little flash of light, and a singed smell. Peri jumped back, holding a sheet with a newly scorched hole.

`Fine, get out yourselves,' she muttered. The container shook quickly from side

to side and a small, red ball flew out, rolled quickly across the floor and stopped with a small thump against the wall.

`You know what they say about washing your dirty laundry in public...' the

Doctor attempted, but stopped as a low, whining sound came from somewhere

near the top of the ball. As it died away, Ba's voice came across the loop, in several short, sharp sentences.

Ìt's my ship! By the time you hear this, I will be on board the ship. I am on board the ship. I have nothing more to say to you. I have something to say to you. My people feel you should accompany us to the exit, as is right and proper.'

The little ship rose off the floor and made for the laundry-room door. It hovered in the corridor outside, vibrating slightly.

'I suppose I'd better show it the way out,' said the Doctor. Peri nodded. Her head hurt too much for her to speak, let alone navigate a way back to the console room.

The Doctor strode off along the corridors and she followed, the ship buzzing on

ahead, circling and coming back like an impatient dog. As soon as the main doors opened, the tiny craft sped through, settling down on the pavement with lights

rushing round in tiny arcs.

Peri stepped out next to it. 'So, I guess this is goodbye?' she said. A light flashed and the noise from the loop suddenly became unbearable. The Doctor turned it

off.

`No, that was goodbye.' He grinned. 'I just hope they don't all try to say thank

you at once. Telepathically, that could be murder.'

Ì don't think they're going to say thank you at all.' peri sighed. 'After all, we as good as kidnapped them. There are entire generations of people on that ship

whose lives have been spent in a laundry basket. Think of all the family and friends Ba will never meet.'

`But his great-great-great-great-grand-nieces and nephews will be in for some

fantastic stories,' said the Doctor reassuringly. 'He'll be a hero. A living legend!'

Ì can't even begin to imagine what it's going to be like for him, poor grumpy

little thing. I mean, he's so much older than anyone on board, only kind of not as

well. That's got to feel weird.'

`You get used to it.' The Doctor smiled, but Peri wasn't really listening.

Ànd outliving your friends. I mean, he's lived longer than anyone who knew

him. His whole time scale's different. It's like he's just carried on, while they grew old and died...' She turned to the Doctor, who suddenly looked tired. 'Me and my

big mouth,' she muttered.

`You don't forget people, Peri.'

A crackle from the ground caught their attention as the little red ball shuddered

into life, and started to spin in circles, first horizontally, then vertically, then in a rapid figure of eight. A pale blue electric light surrounded the ship.

`That's beautiful,' breathed Peri.

`Don't touch it!' warned the Doctor. 'If that force field is strong enough to

protect them as they leave Earth's atmosphere, then it's strong enough to burn

your arm off.' Peri withdrew her hand and took a step back, as a shrill scream

came from the ball. It shot straight up, so quickly that it had gone before she could follow it with her eyes. At least it hadn't headed in the direction of the cricket

pitch, she thought. Someone might have mistaken it for a fast delivery. She waved

to where she thought the ship might be, then silently dropped her hand to her

side.

The bells on the church clock started to chime the hour.

`Twelve o'clock and all's well!' said the Doctor. 'Come on, peri. The cricket

match will be starting any minute now.'

Peri tore her eyes away from the clouds.

Òkay,' she said reluctantly. 'Doctor, do you think Ba will have time to settle

down and have children before he dies?'

`Plenty,' replied the Doctor. 'He's got at least an hour. The golden years!'

12.00

Morphology

Ross Strow

I

Deep inside UNIT HQ the Doctor was meditating.

'Om...'

Amid the incense and serenity, a clock struck noon.

Òm...' he repeated.

Jo Grant was walking through the streets of London, carrying several large and bulging shopping bags, most of which were sporting expensive brand labels.

`booby scooby shooby doo,' she scatted, in her scatty way.

There was nothing as nice as a day like this. She had a UNIT credit card in her

hand — strictly speaking, it was for official expenses only — and there was no sign **of red** alerts, emergencies or panics. However, just as she was planning what to do with her afternoon, a dull sound from the sky drew her attention. Stopping, she

looked up, shielding her eyes from the midday sun with her hand.

The noise grew in intensity, becoming a loud drone. Just as it neared its peak, Jo

saw that an egg-shaped craft was falling — quickly and directly at her. She ducked

Into a shop doorway, just as the pod slashed down onto the pavement besides her.

A pair of blobby monsters morphed themselves from the orb — at first flat as a **sheet,** they each crackled and grumbled and slurped and rumbled until they made themselves whole. They had hairy arms and legs, bald feet and ruddy, bare scalps.

A tapering tail swished behind each. Their entire bodies continually shifted and **changed,** a battle to keep their current blobby state.

Jo was frozen. Words swam around her mind but she couldn't get her brain into **gear.** A high-pitched 'Coo!' was all she could manage. Menacingly, the two

!Matures slowly approached her from both sides.

'Oho!' cried one, the lankier of the two.

Too hoo!' said the squatter alien.

Jo tried to get her thoughts in order. 'Blobs... from pod... on my costly Soho **stroll?**'

thought

she said. Her words just weren't coming out right. It must be the fear, she

. Dropping her shopping bags, she began to run. `So long!'

The creatures gave chase, and soon managed to sprint ahead of her, blocking

Off her escape.

'Coy?' said one of the aliens. 'Don't go, not so soon.'

The other impersonated Jo, copying the tune she'd been scatting. `"Dooby **scooby** shooby doo"?' it said. 'Song! Song!' It seemed very excited.

'Know cool Motown pop, too?' said the other.

`Honky tonk? Doo wop?'

Jo was getting bombarded by questions, and the creatures were creeping closer

and closer, trapping her from both sides.

`Why not try to croon prog rock?'

Òr Snoop Doggy Dogg.'

`Snoop who who?' Jo said, confused.

The squatter alien turned to his comrade. 'Too soon?' he said.

They were within breathing distance. Jo's heart raced, her senses reeled. Aliens

demanding that she sing? This day was getting odder and odder.

`Don't go,' said the taller creature, with menace this time.

But the other gave Jo a wide, warm smile. Kobolds long for groovy songs from

Doctor's bonny consort,' he said.

`Songs?' said Jo, still unable to get any coherent sentences out in full. 'Bonny?'

Òh, do.'

Thoughts were racing through Jo's mind. These aliens, what did they say they

were called? `Kobolds?' she asked.

The aliens chuckled sheepishly, perhaps laughing at their own bad manners.

`Kobold Forty, Jo,' said the smaller alien, indicating himself. He turned to the

other creature. 'Bow now, bro'.'

`Kobold Forty-Two,' said the taller blob, bending a knee. 'How do?'

`Hold on...' said Jo. Something didn't add up. `Kobolds know Jo? How?'

They laughed again. 'Ho, ho!'

Sergeant Osgood was worried. Since he'd clocked on for his shift at UNIT HQ at

twelve o'clock, it seemed that things had only gone from bad to worse.

The Brigadier was on leave, the other officers away too, so he was in charge for

the afternoon. That he couldn't find any soldiers was worrying in itself. Then there was the fact that, according to UNIT's surveillance and tracking equipment, an

alien invasion of London had just begun. Why did this have to happen on his

watch, he thought. Then Osgood remembered that there should at least be one

other person in the complex. The Doctor.

He went and found the scientific adviser's laboratory and knocked tentatively.

`Doctor?'

`Whom?' came the reply, and Osgood opened the door. The Doctor was bent

over a work bench, deep in a delicate scientific experiment, no doubt. He looked

up. 'Worthy Osgood!' he exclaimed, smiling. The sergeant noticed that rather than

tinkering with a technologically advanced piece of equipment, the Doctor was

making tea. 'Pot of oolong?' he asked. 'Or hyson? Mnun?'

`Doctor,' cried Osgood, with relief. 'Good God!'

`How now, Osgood?'

`Not jolly,' he said. 'Noon: Osgood clocks on. No Tommys! My CO's off on

hols...' He paused. In his rush, he hadn't taken time to think about what he was

saying, but he now realised what was wrong. *He* tried speaking, but couldn't engage his mouth. It was only if he chose what he was saying very carefully that he could say anything. 'Hold. Lots of words, no go.

How odd!'

The Doctor smiled. 'Worry not, Osgood. Doctor knows. Brood on my words. On

Osgood's own words, too. Osgood, Doctor: bookworms both. No crossword

dooms Doctor nor Osgood.'

'Osgood's good for words,' the sergeant agreed. 'Osgood's hobby: words.'

`Words of odd forms. Hyponyms, homonyms, homophony...' He clicked his

fingers. 'Morphology!'

`Morphology?'

`Morphology: word form.'

'My word!' exclaimed the sergeant. It had struck him at last. The language they

were using had been affected. They were limited, restricted to just a single vowel.

'My glyphs...' he whimpered plaintively.

Ònly monophthongs for my glossology,' said the Doctor. 'Only "o", now.'

Òr "y", too. Why?' Osgood felt vaguely cheated by that, but kept shtum.

The Doctor's face darkened. 'Who'd know how to block phonology to contort

polyglots' prosody?' he whispered. `To jolt my flow of words: whom so to do?'

Several candidates suggested themselves. `Zygons? Ssorg? K'To?'

`Doctor?' said Osgood, thinking how he could communicate, without

the use of

a full vocabulary, that an alien invasion was happening. 'Osgood spots orbs to north,' he continued slowly. 'Now, oozy, blobby globs drop from sky.'

The Doctor was nodding, understanding every word, it seemed.

`Soon to Doctor's rooms,' Osgood carried on. 'Nobody to hold off blobs. No

convoy, no corps — only Osgood, on my own!'

`So!' the Doctor summarised, rubbing the back of his neck. `No cordon of

troops to stop blobs' **try for** colony. Hmm...'

'Most Kobolds know ofJo,' declared Kobold Forty-Two. 'Dolly Jo.'

`Good looks,' agreed Kobold Forty. 'Not too showy.'

`Top boho togs...'

'Torchon poncho.'

`No two-bob nylon Co-op knock-off!'

Ònyx brooch, cotton wool pom-poms...'

`Plywood clogs, bobby socks... Wow!'

They're listing my clothes, thought Jo. Did they know of her because of her

fashion sense? Wait until they saw the glad rags she'd picked up this morning.

`No Kobolds do not know of Doctor's consort,' said Forty.

`Hold on,' said Jo. '"Doctor's consort"? No. Jo's no "consort"! Jo's...' Her

sentence trailed away as she realised that there were certain words she physically **just** couldn't say. It was like the thoughts were getting cut off at some point **between** her mind and her mouth.

`Doctor's crony?' suggested Forty-Two

'Doctor's droog?' added Forty.

'Doctor's moll?'

Suddenly something clicked in Jo's brain. Her speech and grammar seemed

strange and bizarre in a way she was quite unable to... If she just... Maybe if she...

`My words,' she uttered. 'Odd. Loopy.'

At this, the creatures' tone shifted.

`Jo's wont to go on for too long,' said Forty-Two, impatiently. `No song from Jo

now. Cosh Jo, Forty.'

`No probs,' said Forty, who lunged towards Jo. She flung her hands up in

defence, but caught a blow to the head.

'Cor!' she yelled, and fell to the ground. 'Ow, my coccyx!' Dazed, she watched

the creatures begin to come closer. They sang, `Go, go, blobby Kobolds! Morph,

morph, gloggy Kobolds! Form orbs, strong Kobolds! Strong! Strong! Blobby

Kobolds...'

As unconsciousness engulfed her, Jo became aware that she was being moved.

The Doctor had decided that he and Osgood needed help, and the pair had gone

to UNIT's communications room.

`No go, Doctor.' Osgood sighed, twiddling a screwdriver. 'RT box don't do no

good.'

Òsgood,' the Doctor said, exasperated. 'Not "don't do". Good word to try:

"do..." "Do..."' He paused and changed the subject. `So, no powwow?'

`Nobody from MOD on RT,' explained the sergeant. 'Nor from Porton Down,

nor Wood Norton.' He'd also tried the overseas services. 'From Brooklyn to

Bydgoszcz, no.'

`Too shy?' the Doctor suggested. `No "voyons!" from Lyon?'

`Non.'

`How SOS to Stockholm? No go? No wohl from Bottrop? No Mongols on hold

from Moron , Hovsgal? Oconomowoc? Or Porvoo? Or Kowloon, Hong Kong?'

`Not two jots, Doc.' The sergeant set the receiver aside.

`So,' the Doctor said. 'Wholly solo.'

When she regained her senses, Jo realised quickly that she was tied down to a

chair, and was struck by a repugnant smell. She grimaced. 'Cori Pong!'

She looked around. She was in a smoky room that had a distinctly fishy stench.

Near a wharf, perhaps? A gap in the ceiling caught her eye. Had a third Kobold

creature arrived that way?

`Comfy, Jo?'

She shrieked with fright as Forty-Two cut the darkness with a torch. Forty was

behind him. As her eyes grew accustomed to the room, Jo saw that she faced a

stage, which was dressed in peculiar, unearthly designs. Another alien she hadn't

seen before — there was a third, she thought — was sat at a distance. He had garish sunglasses, which hardly made sense, but, then again, what had so far today?

`Jo,' said the third alien. He was the leader, Jo guessed by the way Forty and

Forty-Two were deferring to him. He gesticulated towards himself. `Kobold Two.'

A stage, thought Jo, and now a stage manager... It struck her that all three

Kobolds were dressed very oddly. It all seemed like a...

`Show!' The leader clapped his hands. 'Show Jo, Kobolds. Jo longs to know

Kobold mythology.' He grinned, then said with glee, `To floor show!'

Jo felt giddy. First they'd been obsessed with her singing, then her clothes, and

now they'd made her a captive audience for some sort of show? As conquering

aliens go, she supposed, it could be a lot worse. But what was going on with their

— and her — language? Why couldn't she articulate properly?

Òld, old Procyon Two,' began the leader, as music began. The creatures,

making a small line, tapped their feet in time. 'Old, old world. Cosy cocoon for

proto-Kobolds. Soon, proto-Kobold joy grows.'

Despite herself, and everything that had happened, Jo felt interested in where

this tale was headed — even during the five-minute interpretive dance. It seemed to be telling the history of their race.

Òh!' exclaimed the leader, suddenly. `To go wrong, too soon.'

`Boo boo!' chorused the other two Kobolds. The lights arced, highlighting a

cave-like set at the centre of the stage. A trapdoor in the floor swung ajar, and dry ice quickly filled the area. As it cleared, a familiar blue rectangular shape juddered upwards into view.

'Vworp!' sang Forty-Two.

'Vworp!' sang Forty.

Òh, no,' muttered Jo.

`Proto-Kobold's holy grotto,' declared the leader. 'proto-Kobold monks kowtow

10 box. Bow to god.' Then, in an aside to his two colleagues, 'Hop, boys, hop!'

As part of the act, Forty-Two and Forty venerated the faux TARDIS, becoming Veritable whirling alien dervishes.

'God drops down on proto-Kobolds' world,' the leader explained. 'Cop box,

pd for proto-Kobolds. Only... not.'

As rapidly as it had emerged, the TARDIS replica withdrew. A final, lamenting,

'Vworp' from Forty and Forty-Two accompanied its exit from the stage.

`Shock!' said the leader, dramatically. 'God pops off too soon! Polyphony

knows.'

The creatures ran every which way. They cried at the skies, flailed

their limbs.

Their distressed underlying shapes twisted and wrenched.

'Proto-Kobolds know of god. Proto-Kobolds form Kobolds. Two Kobold blocs.'

Forty-Two moved to stage left, faced by Forty at stage right.

`Non-monky Kobolds —' the leader indicated the left pooh-pooh holy box no-

' **show.** Kobold monks —' this time the right oohs for ghostly fog's boon.'

A militaristic tune struck up, and the two actor Kobolds played out a staged fight.

'Kobolds shoot Kobolds. No joy on Procyon Two now.'

Forty-Two's character died at Forty's hands.

The stage fell silent.

lo gulped, trying to take it all in.

The leader gazed at her, accusingly, with what seemed like fury. He knew her,

and

history

he knew the TARDIS. And the TARDIS had changed the creatures' planet's

.

Bessie sped along London's roads well above the speed limit.

Sergeant Osgood, in the passenger seat, studied a sheet of paper:

137

Pros? — Cons?

chorology

cosmology

cryptozoology

cytology

glottochronology

g'freseert

Hobson-Jobson folk glossology

homophyly

linfeseerf

hypnology?

logos

loxolophodonts

(coat)

He gave up, bewildered by all this linguistic intricacy. Suddenly, the car braked

and the Doctor jumped up in his seat. He called out 'Honor

`Poor London,' said Osgood. 'From boom town to ghost town so soon.'

Ìloilo?' The Doctor chewed his lip. 'Boycott of vox pops?' he suggested.

"Cos of chronology, Doctor,' said Osgood, sighing. 'Cohorts of blobs flop from pods. Crowds flock from condos. PM hotfoots from Commons to Pontypool,

pronto. Lots of bods follow. No protocol. Orgy of horror.' Despite everything, the

sergeant was acclimatising. He'd managed all that with hardly any pauses — or

thesauruses.

`No cosy morrow.' The Doctor sat down, looking pensive. Osgood could tell

from his face that he had realised what they were up against. 'Plot's work of

Kobolds. Blobby Kobolds, don't y'know.'

`So how to knock bottom from blobby Kobolds' complot?'

The Doctor shifted the car into gear and gripped the wheel. 'Not to blow my

own horn, Osgood...'

Òh, no, boss.'

`Doctor concocts ploy to confront Kobolds. Don't worry. On, on, hot rod!'

With àtoot toot!' and àvroom!' Bessie was soon speeding away.

`Nobody on Procyon Two by now. Swords, crossbows, long bows doom Kobolds'

world. Cold, cold world. Rock frosty.' The leader's pitch had taken a maniacal

timbre. 'Most Kobolds go to pot. Not Kobold Two!'

`Not Forty,' said Forty.

`Nor Forty-Two,' piped up Forty-Two.

`My Kobold monks vow to go forth to spot godly box.' The current scene on the

stage saw the thespian Kobolds traversing space and time.

`God's not forgot god's own,' insisted the leader. `Kobold monks slog 'cross

cosmos. My sons of my sons yomp for yonks. Bongos!'

After an uneasy pause, Jo realised that the last bit had been a stage direction.

Soon, drums started up.

'Yo, ho, ho! Kobold monks, forsworn to follow PC Plod's box, go on for

months. Months! Googols of months.' They continued to reenact their journey,

meeting diverse sights and entities. Kobold Two, leading the way, named each in

turn. `Gloomy tombs. Ky of Solos. Lytton.'

It seemed that this is how the creatures had learnt of the Doctor and Jo. And

then...

'Kronos...'

They had learnt rudimentary, tunnel-based time travel!

Each section of the story was made up of a small mime, with Forty-Two taking

the different parts. Jo realised she couldn't see Forty any more.

'Gong!' Cymbals clashed.

'Kobolds know now of Doctor,' the leader stated.

'Know of Jo, too,' remarked Forty-Two.

'Doctor's known by Kobolds to own holy box. Kobolds go forth to clock

Doctor.'

'Jo!' Forty was in the rafters above the stage. 'From foothold on Jo's world's

moon, Kobold orbs drop. Plop!' He fell, and pancaked as he hit the stage.

'Kobolds stop Jo's Soho stroll,' said Forty-Two, picking up the tale, while his

blend reconstituted himself. `Kobolds long for Jo's own song of Doctor's box.'

They all stared at her. Was that the end of the entertainment?

'Comply,' said the leader expectantly.

She didn't know what they wanted. 'My own song?' she stammered. 'Song of

Doctor...?'

'Doctor's box,' amended Forty, having morphed himself back into shape.

'My own song, of Doctor's own box...' They weren't making it easy. Try as she

might, the language didn't twist and turn the way she needed it to. Hang in there, girl, she thought. A tune. Sing. It must make sense, in a way.

'By hook or by crook,' he warned. `Kobolds drool for Doctor's box. Jo knows

Song of Doctor's box. Kobolds long to know Jo's song.'

Then it struck her. They didn't mean sing. They meant... Sing! Snitch. Fink.

Squeal. Turn nark. Tell all. They wanted the TARDIS, or rather where they might

and it. And *she* knew where it was. But she couldn't 'sing', she couldn't endanger the Doctor.

'No song from Jo,' she said.

'No?' said the leader. `No? No "no" to Kobolds! Kobolds know no word "no"

mm bolshy Jo. Song of Doc's booth. Chop chop!'

'Fool's gold,' said Jo. 'Only Doctor knows of Doctor's box. So!'

'Doctor's dorm? Cotswolds?' asked the leader. They wanted to know where the

Doctor may be.

'Scots moors?' asked Forty-Two.

'By mossy pond?' asked Forty.

Just threaten me directly, thought Jo, but spare me the endless lists!

Eventually, the threats began in earnest

The Doctor's hut, his retreat from *the* rush and panic of London, bustled with 139

activity. Osgood had helped him rig up the apparatus in the kitchen, noting that

the Doctor's travelling contraption — what was it called? The TARDIS? — was stood

in the corner of the room.

The Doctor was clearly irritated that Osgood couldn't at times keep up with

what was going on. Was this what his assistant, Miss Grant, had to put up with?

Being undermined and talked down to just because his experience of time travel,

space travel and power-mad aliens with the ability to alter people's linguistic

dexterity was limited?

The Doctor, surrounded by all his gadgets' innards, was mumbling to himself.

`How to hold off Kobolds from Doctor's croft? S'no Fort Knox. Swop proton

flow?'

`How droll,' said Osgood.

`Conform to my words to form proton box,' instructed the Doctor, ever-so-

slightly patronisingly. `Kobolds block word morphology. Box blocks Kobold's

body morphology. Stop Kobolds, stop word blocks. Won't go wrong!'

But the sergeant had his doubts. 'Bosh! Doctor's wrong. Osgood's know-how's

top, fop!'

`Fop?!' the Doctor cried, indignantly. The two men were soon arguing. Every

`Clodpollr was followed by àLoco!', every 'Clot!' by àCoxcomb!', each

`Gossoonr had its 'Toff!' , and 'Poppycock!' was met with 'Tommy Rollocksr

His patience shredded, the Doctor stamped his feet and headed inside his

TARDIS.

Osgood laid his head in his hands. 'Nobody knows my sorrow,' he said to

himself. 'Oh, my lot! To hold down two jobs — dogsbody, footboy. No knock-off

for Osgood soon. Doctor blows hot 'n' cold, howls down Osgood. My comfort's

shot. No. No. "Who knows most...", so on, so forth. Osgood: go to, go to.'

II

The Doctor stormed into the TARDIS control room. As his hands came to rest on

the console, they formed fists around the nearest levers or switches. Such a simple task, just build a device to jam the aliens' signals and buy a bit of time, but look who he had to work with!

`London's top — Osgood!' He snorted. *'Non compos...'*

The room hummed just softly, waiting for its companion to catch the

tune.

`*Non* compos...' tried the Doctor again, with care, meats. Incompetence.' His grin widened with each syllable. His grip relaxed. 'Ineptitude. Stupidity.

Ridiculousness. Silliness!'

He leapt out the doorway.

Suddenly, the Doctor came out of the TARDIS, beaming to himself.

`How now brown cow,' he declared.

`Doctor?' asked Osgood, but the Doctor darted inside the TARDIS again. The

sergeant took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. This was one mad day.

* * *

140

'Well, 'pon — ahem — upon my word,' said the Doctor, back in the control room.

'By George, if not perhaps Saint John Chrysostom, I've got it. Other vowels to

voice at last — the full contingent. No more forced synonymy.'

However, the freedom only existed inside the TARDIS, for now. He studied the

controls. What was different? Why was this the eye of the storm, the empty space

within the circular form?

Tosh made his way out of the greenhouse and stopped every few paces to peer

Inside the sack he was carrying, with barely contained delight. He'd been keeping

an eye on a cottage for a few days now — it had been empty for at least a week and **he'd** taken his opportunity to have a snoop around its greenhouse.

It wasn't stealing as such, he thought, more a redistribution of wealth. The

owner of the cottage — Tosh'd seen him once, a right old dandy — obviously used

This as his country retreat. Probably had a London residence as well. In that case, **be** wasn't going to miss a few things taken from his greenhouse by a homeless man, was he?

'Ooh, och,' muttered Tosh. 'Job lot of goods dost hold off wolf from door.' At

what he thought was a safe distance, Tosh leant against a fence post and had a **proper** look at what he'd stolen.

'Corn. Box of polony. Broom. Loop of cord. Wood... Bosk of holly! Ho ho!'

jo suddenly found herself in a field, along with the three Kobolds.

'Woozy, groggy,' she complained, struggling to find the words. `Kobolds don't

sot no lorry?'

'Kobolds go by orb,' said the leader. That's as maybe, thought Jo, but for

humans, forming an homogeneous orb and being deposited out at the other end

wasn't a pleasant way of travelling.

Forty-Two caught sight of a tramp in a nearby field. 'Oho! Now Kobold Forty-

Two's got wry sport,' he said. 'Look down knoll.'

'Kobolds look down on low-down hobo,' said the leader contemptuously.

Jo had been pressed into revealing the address of the Doctor's cottage.

He was **doing** some kind of work there on the TARDIS, escaping what he called 'the usual Interruptions'. She felt badly about betraying the Doctor so easily. Perhaps the

tramp

would provide a distraction for the aliens. Anything to buy the Doctor a bit **more** time.

`Long-off pot shot?' suggested Forty-Two.

'No!' cried Jo. `No. Mock hobo, no pot shot.' What was the worst they could do;

sing at him?

'Good-oh, moody floozy,' agreed the aliens' leader. 'Forty! Forty-Two! Go, for

two **mos.**'

They hurried down the bill towards the tramp.

'**So,** crook,' said Forty-Two when they reached him. 'Got odds 'n' sods "on **look"?**'

'Nosy...!' began the tramp, but caught his breath at the Kobolds looming over

him. 'By cob's body... Ores!'

bolds, mbo

Kobolds,

ds,' said Forty.

The tramp tried to stand and hitch his swag over his shoulder at the same time.

He staggered, and was steadied by Forty.

`No, blobby Kobolds. From Procyon Two.'

`Kobolds? From...?' The tramp's expression changed. Jo knew the look

well. In

her days with UNIT, she'd seen that most members of the general public go into

either shock or denial — or both — when faced with aliens. Some, however, like this man, seem to take it as confirmation of what they've believed for a long time.

'Proof Tosh's no potty psycho.'

`No songs,' said Forty-Two, having grabbed the tramp's other arm. `No corny

old-world rhythms.'

Jo realised that the Kobolds knew this man wouldn't be able to help them find

the Doctor or the TARDIS.

Òh?' Tosh saw the menace in Forty-Two's face. 'Oh... oh... blood blooms...!

Poor Tosh's worms' food.'

Òh, no!' Jo closed her eyes, and only heard the demise of the poor man.

rl

Looking again to see the *three* aliens and a cloud of smoke, she saw the leader 1111

shrug his shoulders.

`Who's sorry now?' said Forty-Two.

jl

`No, no, no, no, no!'

The Doctor *threw* down his sonic screwdriver and paced once around the

TARDIS console.

Sergeant Osgood entered, obviously in a state of panic. He was feeling his way

in, too, without his glasses.

`Doctor! Kobold polypods stomp on rooftop! Osgood mops brow. Photon box

knocks, rocks, throbs... holds good for now. Throng of Kobolds knock down door

to room! "Boo!" Kobold orb socks Osgood. Osgood drops to floor...!'

I !

`Yes,' murmured the Doctor. 'You're quite the Greek chorus, aren't you,

Sergeant. Tryphiodorus would approve, I'm sure.'

Osgood blinked more times than strictly necessary. 'Doctor?' Though it was

clear he had now realised that he could use any word he pleased, the sergeant

seemingly found none easily forthcoming. He settled on, simply: 'Why?'

`Why...?' Pah! The man was insufferable. But then the Doctor's scowl lifted.

'"Why"...? Eureka!'

With huffing and puffing, the Kobold orb squeezed its way through into the

cottage. The aliens re-individuated, dropping Jo onto the Doctor's chaise longue.

`Not on foot down tor, oh, no. No fools, Kobolds,' she said archly.

But the aliens' full attention was directed into the corner of the room.

`Golly,' said Jo, noticing the TARDIS. 'Doctor's lost now.'

While the leader kept a reverent distance, and Forty stared in bafflement up at

the writing on the TARDIS exterior, Forty-Two ran his blobby extrusions across its

surface of blue, chipped paint and soft vibration.

`Lost, Jo?' The Doctor popped his head out of the TARDIS. 'Not mostly.'

`Doctor!' Jo gesticulated wildly. 'Shoo! Go, now!'

`No, Jo.' Ushering Osgood into the room, the Doctor half-shut the TARDIS

door. 'Doctor's no grotty host. Two o'clock soon.' He extended a hand of greeting

In the creatures' direction. 'Too soon for Scotch?'

The leader growled. 'Forty!' he snapped.

Forty was still studying the TARDIS's markings. 'Holy god...' he breathed.

`Forty-Two,' cried the leader. `Do for old chop-logs!'

`No probs, Brown Owl.' Forty-Two sneered at the Doctor. 'Cop box's short stop

on Procyon Two stops proto-Kobold boyhood. Orthodoxy forms. Now, Forty-Two

scoffs. Forty-Two scorns shoddy box and shoddy docs. No tomorrow!'

The blobby Kobold lunged at the Doctor, who, already adopting a stance **for**

combat, cried, 'Toro!'

Jo saw that Osgood was virtually blind — he'd lost his glasses somehow — and led

him away out of danger. She kept the sergeant up to date with a running

commentary. 'Doctor 'n' Forty-Two lock horns for chop-socky. No

holds off. Oh, Do! Kobold slogs Doctor's jowls. Body blow **follows.**'

The Doctor wiped a sliver of blood from the corner of his mouth. Forty-Two's

tail lashed.

'Hold: Kobold's worst off now... Doctor wrong-foots Forty-Two, throws blobby

Kobold on roll-top!'

The desk shook beneath the slippery alien.

'Port, Doctor!' urged Jo. 'Lollop to port.' Distracted, the Doctor didn't see the Kobold's left hook. 'Whoops, sorry! My port!' Root for Doctor, she thought, not

Kobolds. She continued to describe events breathlessly: 'Doctor boldly lobs knotty foot stool to Forty-Two, who sort of drops rococo prop...'

'Blow-for-blow, spry Doctor's odds-on,' said Osgood, his unseeing eyes wide.

The Doctor groaned.

'Oh!' cried Jo. 'Low blow from Kobold, by Doctor's booth's doorpost. **Doctor moons!'**

The way was clear. The three Kobolds made their way inside the TARDIS.

Jo helped the Doctor up. The wind was knocked out of him, but he was smiling.

lobold Forty-Two bounced into the console room, jabbing the air with his fists.

Wow worm! Slob! Old **one!**'

Forty was aghast. 'Forty-Two spoke our holy word!'

'"One"?' Forty-Two stopped. He said it again: 'One.'

'Prostrate yourselves, brothers,' said Kobold Two. 'Our long, long journey

concludes. Our voices join one worshipful chorus of total vocabulary.'

As the Doctor and Jo entered, the Kobolds knelt before the console Each in turn

Made veneration.

'Holy of holies.'

'Our lord god of polygons.'

They returned each time to repeat in unison: Kobold One.'

'Fascinating,' said the Doctor. 'They're still only using words with "o" in them.

they're not quite free of it. Can they ever be, I wonder?'

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The leader held up a hand. His brethren fell silent. `Kobold One covets constant

hymnody. Remove unorthodox Doctor. Dispose ofJo.'

Forty seemed genuinely sad. 'Sorry, Jo.'

`No.' Forty-Two stood in Forty's way. 'Behold Kobold Forty-Two's words.

Vowels, unclogged. Orating more vowels, Kobold Forty-Two could become

Kobold One! Not some off-white console belonging to... to chrono-lord!'

Forty-Two, the Kobold who would be One, rounded on his fellow creatures.

Sergeant Osgood made it, on his hands and knees, to the roll-top desk.

Opening it, he grabbed the proton box, then shuffled unsteadily toward the

TARDIS.

`Why not?' demanded Forty-Two. 'No more would Forty-Two kowtow to "o".'

`The power's gone to his head,' whispered Jo.

`Not just the promise of power,' replied the Doctor. 'Our globulous friend's just

had his mind opened to the possibility of using other vowels in the same word as

" p "1

Ànd?' she asked.

`Well,' said the Doctor, 'that's not the only thing he's about to discover. I hope.'

He looked on, and muttered to himself, 'Come on, old girl.'

`Forty-Two,' commanded the leader. 'Rejoin blobby agglomeration now!'

`Rejoin?' laughed Forty-Two. 'L.?'

He stopped. Everything stopped.

`"I"?' As the vowel hung in the air, the blobby interior of Forty-Two's body stopped its churning, and he became fully solid.

`Doctor, the box works! Come outside and —'

'Osgood, no!'

But the sergeant had already brought the lash-up of a gadget inside.

With a 'boom!' and a 'whoosh!' and a last, fizzled 'pop!' the proton box

exploded.

When the smoke cleared, Forty-Two was the only Kobold that remained.

The Doctor made frantic passes over the console's controls. 'There's still time.'

Forty-Two shook his head. 'Not bossy Doctor, nor sooty Osgood, nor

goodly Jo,

stop Kobold Forty-Two's morph to Kobold One.'

`Him too? Jo,' urged the Doctor. 'He's going to try to take over the TARDIS itself.

I need a distraction. You have some kind of connection with him. Do something.'

Jo grabbed the creature's hands. 'Listen, Forty-Two, please. Listen.' But the

alien's expression registered no understanding.

`Regression!' cried the Doctor. 'He can't hear other vowels any more, Jo. Use

"o"s.'

Jo sighed. 'Good now, Forty-Two?'

`Jo.' The blobby Kobold recognised her. 'Forty-Two longs for glory too. Sorry for

chloroform, by proxy. Go now, Jo. So long.'

`No,' said Jo, but she couldn't shift him away from the console. She cast around

for anything to distract the alien. She found it, and after a moment's blank, bleak terror, she found the words.

`Forty-Two. Look to frontons.' She pointed at the walls. 'Fronton bowls form

rows of .. rows of...' she prompted.

"'O"s,' said the Kobold, as his limbs regressed into his primary mass. 'Rows of

"o"s. Lots of rows of "o"s. Lots of sorts of rows of "òs ...'

Following the roundels around the room, the Kobold described a loop which

might have been endless, but for his becoming his own evolutionary antecedent.

Ill

'So you *have* been to their planet,' said Osgood, munching on a biscuit. The Doctor had served afternoon tea in the kitchen.

'Not quite,' the Doctor confessed. 'During one of my earlier attempts to break

my exile, the TARDIS nearly managed to materialise on Procyon Two. I say nearly, because the Time Lords put paid to that —'

`Doctor,' the sergeant interrupted. 'Suppose one day we all just stopped using a letter of the alphabet. Or started using a new one. Would anyone actually notice?'

The Doctor looked livid.

`Don't fret,' said Jo. Ì'd quite like to hear the full explanation.'

`Well, you see, Jo,' said the Doctor, turning away from Osgood. 'You may have

noticed the TARDIS does us a great favour in making our speech intelligible to

people from other cultures and other worlds.'

`Yes.' She nodded. 'It's the telepathic circuits, isn't it?'

`Well, really, that's only the way we perceive it. Rather, in a typically arrogant piece ofTime Lord ingenuity, the TARDIS locks on to the world where we're about

to arrive, and makes our language available to all the inhabitants.'

`So they speak English. Hmm! Convenient.'

'It usually works, provided there are no other sources of temporal energy

interfering.' He sipped his tea. 'When I made my short trip to the proto-Kobolds'

world, though, the process was begun, then rudely halted.'

`Leaving the poor jumped-up sentient beings with nothing but a vowel, a semi-

vowel, and fading legends of the TARDIS?'

`Yes, quite. It was Osgood who helped me realise, actually. Him incessantly

asking "why" reminded me that, although we seemed limited to "o", we were also I using "y" happily. We weren't limited in and of ourselves, but were under restriction from an external source. It pointed to the imposition of a written

constraint, and my people are nothing if not people of the book.

The old girl took a bit of a tumble during our recent battle against the Master.*

His meddling with the telepathic circuits, Jo, did more than minor damage to the TARDIS's translation systems. When the Kobolds arrived, they triggered in her a

kind of memory of work unfinished. But in trying to complete the job, she

***— Q.v. Story 000**

unwittingly made everyone on this world speak with the same constraints as the

aliens. Until Kobold Forty-Two made his egotistical breakthrough, at which point

the outside world could follow suit.

Ì'd hoped to then stabilise the malfunction within the TARDIS, but Osgood's

interference blew that notion. So the only thing to do was to return poor old Forty-Two to his natural state. Hopefully we can find him a new world, somewhere.'

Jo sat for a couple of minutes, just not thinking anything. 'Oh, no!' She bolted

for the telephone.

`Whatever could be the matter, Jo?' the Doctor asked.

`My shopping!' she gabbled. 'I've got to get Mike or someone to go find the

bags. Or go back to the store and get a refund. I deserve credit, at least.'

Òh, Jo.' The Doctor smiled. 'What a gowk you are.'

She frowned. `Gowk?'

He wiggled his eyebrows toward the clock on the wall. From it, just then, a

mechanical gowk popped out, and said, 'Cuckoo. Cuckoo.'

14.00

Making History

Trevor Baxendale

Extract from Making History — the Chronicle *of the* Thirtieth Century by Professor Adra Mollust (third edition, New Kolpron Press, translated from the original Bandril

text):

The Human-Omwanar galactic peace treaty *was due to be signed at exactly* 3.00pm on 23 April 2978 (Galactic *Meridian Time). It* would mark the end of a conflict between two interstellar *superpowers* that, if it *had continued, could have eventually resulted in the destruction of the entire galaxy.* Both sides *had developed devastating weaponry and a* pathological refusal to surrender.

The humans — *advanced bipedal* primates with *very small teeth and eyes* and practically no telepathic ability at all — had *spread* throughout *the* stars from their watery *homeworld of* **Earth** *over many* centuries, *establishing* colonies in the furthest reaches ofthe galaxy. . *Powerful*

and arrogant (as well as inventive) they were truly a race *to be* reckoned with.

The Omwanar were a race of amphibian jellyfish with *poisonous* tentacles and a distrust of **all** *ape-descended species.* Naturally isolationist and surprisingly technologically *advanced,* **they** *protected* their *long string of colonised gas giants,* with *fierce* and efficient *violence.*

No one truly remembers *how* the conflict between *the two space races began:* **it** is rumoured Y. **to** *have* been *the result of crossfire in a pirate* skirmish on the Omwanar border, which resulted **in a** pre-emptive neutronicfirst strike on an Earth *space* station. The conflict *escalated* rapidly **in a** *series of* tit-for-tat planetary assaults. In reality, both *sides* had *long been spoiling* for a fight — with *anyone — and the pirate clash was* simply *an excuse.*

Ten Earth years later, *a steady succeccion of gravity* destructors, Z-bombs and electron repolarisation waves *had generated* interstellar voids littered with burnt-out suns, blackened planets and irradiated *moons.*

4.

pressure *was* brought to bear on both sides to *cease hostilities* — the rest of the galaxy *had no desire* to be caught up in such a vicious conflict, especially when entire solar systems were being sacrificed in the name *of having the last word.*

Eventually, after many long months of painstaking and cautious diplomacy, an historic **and** utterly vital — peace treaty *was due to* be *signed. The galaxy* really *was on the* brink of an unprecedented and much-needed outbreak *of peace.*

When the prospect of a signed treaty of non-aggression became a reality, Space-General Sir

Robert Titan' Simmons *was* the only Earthman for *the job.* A hero *of* Earth's *armed forces* and **twentieth a real veteran of many battles,** *he could, allegedly,* trace his military *ancestors* back to the

century. He thus commanded *a strange and special respect from* the Omwanar **leadership.**

His role in the history of the galaxy would be crucial...

Space-General Sir Robert 'Titan' Simmons lay sprawled in the

armchair, head **back, eyes open, lips grey. A shock of thick black hair hung untidily from a high,** 149

intelligent forehead. There was a faint look of surprise on the otherwise

handsome face, as if he couldn't quite believe what had just happened.

Ì'm very much afraid that this man is dead,' announced the Doctor, clutching

the lapels of his jacket and tapping them with his fingers.

but...' stammered the thin, nervous-looking man who had served as

the space-general's assistant. His voice rose to an appalled squeak. 'How can this

happen?'

`Coronary thrombosis,' answered the Doctor grimly. 'A massive heart attack.

It's very sad. Yes, indeed, very sad.'

`Never mind that!' the assistant gasped. He kept staring at the dead body, and

then looking up at the Doctor, as if not knowing who or what to believe. 'What am

I going to do?'

The Doctor looked back at the dead man. 'Well, there isn't a lot you can do. The

heart failure... it was fatal.'

`But... you're a doctor, for heaven's sake! Do something!'

Ànd what would you suggest, hmm? Instant resurrection? Do try to make

sense, young man!'

The assistant clamped a sweating hand over his face and dragged it slowly

down, as if trying to wipe away the sheer panic that was evident in his features.

`How can I put this?' he began, his voice wavering. 'The future of the entire galaxy depended on this man...' he pointed a trembling finger at the corpse staying

alive. At least for the next hour or so.'

'Doctor!' A man thrust his way into the room. 'What's going on? Where are we?

I can't make head or tail of the TARDIS instruments and — oh.' He spotted the

body slumped in the armchair and halted in mid stride.

`Do try to keep up, Steven, my boy,' replied the Doctor sharply. 'You're no use to

me at all, trailing five minutes behind all the time. Now, we're on an asteroid

floating in the middle of space, that is a dead man, and this is... I'm so sorry, you didn't give me your name.'

`Harlow,' said the assistant.

`Mr Harlow,' said the Doctor, with the briefest of smiles. 'This is my young

friend, Steven Taylor.'

Harlow took a deep breath. 'In any other circumstances, I would be fascinated

to know exactly how you two got here. But right now, I have other things to worry

about.'

`This unfortunate soul, yes,' agreed the Doctor, gesturing at the body in the

chair. 'Who was he? Someone important, judging by his uniform.'

`Space-General Sir Robert Simmons,' said Harlow tonelessly. His initial

nervousness seemed to have subsided into a state of shock. He looked pasty-faced

and bewildered, his voice dropping to a defeated whisper. 'I can't believe he's

dead.'

`Were you close?' asked Steven gently.

Harlow gave him a withering look, and the Doctor tutted irritably. 'Don't be

ridiculous! Mr Harlow is the space-general's personal assistant. Or at least he

was.'

Harlow lowered himself into a vacant chair, unable to take his eyes off the

space-general. The space-general was unable to take his eyes off the ceiling, until the Doctor leant over and shut them with a delicate touch. 'Heart attack,' he

explained to Steven. 'Tragic.'

Steven nodded earnestly. 'That's awful. He doesn't look all that old.'

'He was the picture of health,' said Harlow miserably. 'Fit as a fiddle. Fifty press-ups every morning without fail. Strong as a lion. He was never even ill — not even so much as a cold. I don't understand it.'

The Doctor patted him on the shoulder. 'You never know the moment, my boy.'

'I know that. But why did it have to be this moment? Of all moments?'

'This moment being...?' prompted Steven.

'The space-general was here to sign the peace treaty,' said Harlow. He rubbed a

hand over his face again. If anything, he was getting paler. 'Oh, Lord, this is a disaster. The Omwanar ambassador is in the next room. Simmons was the only

human being it'll trust. Without him, the deal's off.' He looked up, tears filling his eyes. 'Nothing will stop the war now.'

'What war?' asked Steven, who had never been one for subtlety.

Harlow looked at him as though he was mad. 'Are you insane? What do you

mean, what war?'

'Er, what my young friend means,' began the Doctor hurriedly, 'is that, erm,

well, we've been away.' It was a lame finish, and the old man was left rubbing his fingers together as *he* tried to summon a more convincing follow-up. 'Out of touch, as it were. Of course, we know all about the war. Yes, all about it — except for the, er, details, you might say.'

Harlow looked quizzically from one to the other. 'Don't you follow the news?'

'Sometimes,' the Doctor told him. 'Other times it's the football results. Now,

didn't I hear you mention the Omsomething...?'

'Omwanar '

'Yes, that. Those. And they're in the next room, you say?' The Doctor switched

his piercing gaze to the steel double doors on the far side of the chamber.

Harlow nodded. 'The Omwanar leader is waiting to sign the peace treaty. Put an

end to all these years of death and destruction. At least, that was the plan.'

'Why can't we just tell them what's happened?' wondered Steven. 'I'm sure

they'd understand. After all, no one could have anticipated this.' He jerked a thumb at Simmons.

'You obviously don't know the Omwanar. They look like six-foot jellyfish and

they're

Actually

incredibly paranoid. It's taken months and months to get them this far — to

share an asteroid with a human being, let alone sign a peace treaty. If they

Ind out Simmons is dead — well, they just won't believe that it's a coincidence.

They'll suspect something. He's the only man they'll trust. The moment they get

Wind of the fact that he's... gone... they'll withdraw.'

'Perhaps alternative arrangements could be made?' suggested the Doctor.

'Won't work. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.' He looked at the

space-general's cold remains and curled his lip at the irony.

'I'm sure I could explain the situation to them,' the Doctor said. 'I do have some 151

experience in these matters. I deal with hostile aliens all the time. The Zarbi, the Rills, the Sensorites...'

Ànd don't forget the Daleks,' added Steven.

Ì think we better had,' advised the Doctor quietly.

Harlow was staring into space, his eyes red-rimmed. 'They'd kill you in an

instant,' he said. 'As soon as they realised you weren't Simmons, they'd kill you.

poison tentacles — pfft!' He jabbed the splayed fingers of one hand at the Doctor,

who recoiled. 'You'd be dead before you hit the floor, old man.'

`Don't be impertinent. Old man, indeed! There's plenty of life in me yet — I'm as

fit as a fiddle.' He glanced at Simmons and winced. 'To coin a phrase.'

`What's going to happen when Simmons doesn't meet with the Omwanar?'

asked Steven. 'When will they begin to get suspicious?'

`They won't begin to get suspicious. The Omwanar are suspicious all the time.'

Harlow got to his feet and began to pace up and down. 'They're probably flexing

their stinging tentacles as we speak.'

`Let's not panic.'

`Panic? I don't know about you, but I don't fancy a painful death by alien

neurotoxin. And I don't fancy kick-starting another galactic war!'

`Steven's perfectly correct,' said the Doctor firmly. 'It's no use panicking, no use at all. We must look on the bright side. I mean, if we all die here today, none of us need ever know what terrible atrocities will follow.'

Harlow glowered at him.

`There must be something we can do,' Steven insisted. He checked his watch.

Àdmittedly, it'll have to be something quick...'

The Doctor tapped his lips thoughtfully. 'You know, there's something very odd

about all this...' He was cut short, however, by the sudden arrival of a uniformed

man with short, iron-grey hair and eyes full of burning impatience. He was already

speaking as the rear door to the anteroom hummed shut behind him.

Ì've just got your message, Harlow. Came over asap.' He glanced momentarily

at the Doctor and Steven and then looked back at Harlow. 'What's going on? Who

are these people?

Èr,' said Harlow. He didn't get any further.

The newcomer had allowed his gaze to fall on the dead body in the chair. He

pursed his lips as the enormity of what it meant sank in. Then he breathed in

sharply, nostrils flaring, as he came to a decision. ' Without Simmons we're sunk.

I'll organise the fleet to move onto a war footing...'

`Now let's not be hasty,' said the Doctor.

The newcomer turned sharply. 'Who the hell are you? What are you doing here?'

The Doctor and Steven arrived just after Simmons collapsed,' explained Harlow

quickly. 'They've been trying to help.'

Ì'm afraid we've not been much use so far,' admitted the Doctor, offering his

hand. 'And who might you be?'

`Space-Colonel Rufus Malvin,' responded the newcomer automatically. 'I'm

sorry, but I just don't follow this. It's quite ridiculous. This asteroid is supposed to be an ultra-secure, top-secret installation.'

`Supposed to be!' repeated the Doctor with gleeful contempt.

`You shouldn't be here,' Malvin persisted.

'And yet we clearly are.'

Harlow cleared his throat. 'Sirs, the situation is pressing. There really is no time for any further delay...'

'Quite right,' Malvin agreed, though it was clear he was still intrigued by the

presence of the Doctor and his friend. He drew himself up to his full height and

squared his shoulders. 'I'll contact the fleet.'

'Don't be foolish,' snapped the Doctor. 'You'll restart an entire galactic war just because one man has sadly passed away?'

'What choice do we have?'

'There's nothing we can do,' Harlow complained.

Ìsn't there?' The Doctor's eyes glittered as he looked from one man to the other.

'You're not thinking hard enough! There's nothing to stop Space-General

Simmons signing the peace treaty. Nothing at all.'

'Except that he's dead,' pointed out Malvin.

The Doctor waved the objection aside. 'Do any of the Omwanar know exactly

What Simmons looks like...? No. I thought not. In all likelihood one human being

will look very similar to another from the point of view of a six-foot jellyfish.'

'What are you suggesting, Doctor?' asked Harlow nervously.

'Isn't it obvious? A substitute, of course!'

'But this is preposterous!' Malvin declared. 'I couldn't possibly stand in for

Simmons — it'd be suicide!'

The Doctor tittered scornfully. 'My dear fellow, I wasn't talking about you!'

An interested frown appeared on Harlow's brow. 'Who ***do*** you have in mind?'

The Doctor tutted. 'Oh, do I have to think of everything? Use your eyes, man!'

He turned to his companion.

'Who, me?' said Steven.

The uniform was stiff and uncomfortable, and it felt oddly cold. Steven supposed **this** was probably just his imagination, an irrational sensation caused by

corpse the knowledge that, only minutes before, the uniform had been worn by a

.

He certainly didn't feel like a space-general. He felt like exactly what he was — an for dressed up as a space-general. A phony. An intruder. He could feel his

West sticking to his back with perspiration; feel the pulse of his blood in his

temples

and the dull ache of gas in his intestines.

The double doors hissed open in front of him, and he jumped. The doors

ed out to a wide, circular room dominated by an oval desk. Steven swallowed **hard** as he saw what was sitting on the far side of the desk.

it was six or seven feet tall, a pulsating grey sack of gelatin trailing a

number of **boneless** white limbs. Amoeboid internal organs could be seen throbbing within **the** transparent mantle, while the tentacles twitched idly.

Steven was face to face with the Omwanar leader, and it was a shockingly ugly ture. But, with a cold chill of fear, Steven knew that unless he succeeded in

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convincing this alien that he was Space-General Robert Simmons, it was going to

get a damn sight uglier.

It would be suicide, Malvin had said.

With a kind of awful formality, the Omwanar rose slightly from behind the desk.

It appeared to be floating, presumably buoyed by the translucent sack of gas

visible beneath its mantle. Steven sought to control his pulse rate and breathing as the creature let out a strange, bubbling squawk. It sounded like a frog falling to its death down a drainpipe.

Then words in English spurted from the speaker grill of a tiny, hovering

interpreter robot. 'Space-General Simmons!'

Steven never had any difficulty understanding the languages of the alien species

he met, presumably thanks to travelling with the Doctor, and he found this

cumbersome routine a bit disconcerting. But then, as the Omwanar spoke again

in its strange, gurgling voice, he found that he could understand it. And then the

robot would offer its own translation.

`Welcome, Space-General,' said the Omwanar.

Ì was beginning to think you'd never turn up!' translated the interpreting

machine with a kind of diplomacy that even Steven found questionable. But, such

was the conviction in its metallic voice that Steven found himself automatically

looking behind him, just to be sure that the real Simmons hadn't risen from the

dead and followed him in. Steven then looked back at the alien leader, open-

mouthed, wondering how he should respond.

`You are Space-General Simmons, I take it?' gurgled the Omwanar.

`Very reluctant and suspicious to meet you, Space-General Simmons!' said the

robot.

Èr, hello,' Steven managed eventually, with all the aplomb he could muster.

`Greetings of misery,' piped the interpreter.

Ì am Lyshur Lysus,' announced the alien, and, inevitably, the robot translated

this in full as, 'I am the Severely Toxic Gland Leader.'

Steven swallowed hard. 'Er... how do you do?' He started to hold out his hand

but quickly withdrew it when the Omwanar's tentacles starting uncoiling towards

him in response. 'I cannot imagine how you procreate,' rasped the interpreter on

Steven's behalf.

`You do not enjoy physical contact?' asked Lyshur Lysus.

`You offend me with your lack of intimacy, human,' translated the robot,

earning a hard look from Steven.

Eventually, Steven replied, 'I fear that we may not be physically compatible.' And

instantly regretted it.

À pox on your alien notions of intimacy!' squawked the translator in the

Omwanar language.

This time Steven had simply had enough. 'Can't we switch that wretched thing

off?'

Lyshur Lysus quivered and gurgled, while the translator robot spun around and

fixed Steven with its glowing camera-eye. 'This machine cannot be deactivated!' it

managed to squeak, just before Steven reached up, plucked it out of the air and

banged it, hard, on the desk. The little sphere rattled and buzzed for a second and then went quiet. When *Steven* let go, the thing rolled off the edge of the table and landed with a thud on the carpet

`Thank goodness for that,' muttered Steven.

`You speak our language?' the Omwanar said wonderingly.

Steven tried a smile. 'Sort of. At least we can understand each other now,

without any... help.'

Lyshur Lysus bubbled with intense satisfaction. 'What a relief!' it blurted. 'I

thought those things were supposed to make life easier.'

`Me too,' Steven agreed. 'But it's often better to manage without them. I'm sorry

if I — if it — insulted you.'

`Think nothing of it, Space-General. It is a relief to find that you are so

accommodating and intelligent. We understood all human beings to be ignorant

scum.'

`Well...' began Steven uncomfortably. 'Let's forget all about it and start again,

shall we?'

In the anteroom, Harlow, Malvin and the Doctor were watching Steven's progress

on a monitor screen.

`He's doing remarkably well,' commented Harlow. He had been chewing his

nails down to the bone until Steven had knocked out the translator. 'He must have

a real flair for languages.'

The Doctor was nodding proudly. 'I taught him everything he knows, of course.'

`He's a naive blunderer,' said Malvin. 'He'll be dead inside the next minute.'

`You almost sound as if you wish that were true,' said the Doctor. He stared

accusingly at the space-colonel.

`Well, it's madness,' Malvin replied. 'He's completely unqualified.'

The Doctor harrumphed. 'I suppose you think it should have been you in there?'

`Not likely!'

`Shh,' said Harlow, pointing at the monitor. 'This is getting interesting.'

'This is indeed a great moment in the history of our respective species,' gurgled

Lyshur Lysus. 'Although more so for yours, of course.'

Èxactly what I was thinking,' replied Steven graciously. He was sitting at the desk opposite the Omwanar, and beginning to get the hang of things now Disposing of

the translator had really broken the ice. Some of the Omwanar's diplomatic skills **needed** a bit of getting used to, but Steven really couldn't take any offence. After all, **the** insults were largely accidental and not really aimed at him personally. How **could** they be, when Lyshur Lysus thought he was someone else entirely?

`Come closer,' ordered the alien suddenly.

Trying not to look like he was holding his breath, Steven edged closer to the

alien. The glistening slime that oozed around the mantle gave off a noxious odour.

`Time is growing short, Space-General,' the Omwanar bubbled quietly.

Ì came as quickly as I could,' Steven insisted. 'I'm afraid there was a slight

delay...'

`No matter.'

'We can still sign the peace deal,' Steven continued. He looked at the documents

spread across the glossy oval desk. 'Is this it? Where's the pen?' He patted the

pockets of his borrowed uniform. 'I don't seem to have one with me. I don't

suppose...?' He looked enquiringly at Lyshur Lysus. 'No, I don't suppose you do.'

`There is no need for undue haste, surely. This is a momentous occasion! It

should not be rushed.'

'No, of course not.' Steven sat back, struggling to keep a lid on his impatience.

He just wanted to get the job done and get out. If all it took was signing a name on a piece of paper, then all the better.

'Do you have another appointment?' asked the Omwanar leader. 'Your body

language... such as I am able to tell... indicates that you are very keen to leave.'

`No,' answered Steven instantly. 'I've got all day — no plans. Apart from this

meeting, of course.'

There was a long, awkward silence while Lyshur Lysus quivered and the long

pallid tentacles coiled and uncoiled with a horrible squelching sound. Steven had

no idea if the creature was laughing or preparing to attack. Or possibly both.

Only Harlow was still watching the monitor screen. The Doctor was busy fielding

questions from Rufus Malvin.

`You have yet to explain exactly how you came to be here, Doctor!'

Ìt's fortunate for you that I am, isn't it?' retorted the Doctor . 'Really! I will not be subjected to an interrogation!'

Ì could make this a formal enquiry if you prefer.'

`That won't be necessary.'

sincerely hope not.' Malvin sat down and crossed his legs calmly. 'How did

you get here? It's a simple enough question.'

`We came in through that door,' the Doctor replied with equal tranquillity. He

pointed at the rear doors leading to the asteroid's lateral airlock. 'Just as you did.'

`Then where is your spaceship?'

'My dear young man. You must have seen the large blue telephone box in the

airlock as you came in.'

`Yes...'

`Then you've seen all you need to.' The Doctor waved a hand dismissively and

turned to Harlow. 'Now listen here, my boy... I'd like to examine that body again

if I may.'

Harlow looked startled at the sudden change of subject. 'Of course. Why?'

`There's something bothering me. Something's not quite right about it.'

`What are you trying to imply?' demanded Malvin, jumping to his feet.

Ì'm not trying to imply anything. I'm merely curious.' A smile flickered over the

old man's lips. 'It's my only *vice.'*

`What's there to be curious about? The man died of a heart attack. You said so

yourself.'

'Oh, there's no doubt about the heart attack,' agreed the Doctor. 'It's the cause

I'm interested in.'

`The fate of the entire galaxy is resting on your friend's shoulders.'

`Steven has very broad shoulders. I shouldn't worry.'

`He could be exposed any moment! The Omwanar aren't stupid, you know.'

The Doctor bustled past the outraged colonel, heading for the couch where

Space-General Simmons's body had been laid out. The Doctor paused and looked

back at Malvin with a cold, penetrating stare. 'Don't concern yourself with Steven.

My friend is a very capable young man, and I have every confidence in him.'

Harlow pulled back the sheet that was covering the space-general's face. The

handsome features looked waxy and stiff. 'Did you say that this man was in

excellent health, my boy?'

`Right up until the moment when he, er, died,' said Harlow, nodding. 'He was

in perfect shape. Everyone knew that.'

The Doctor stroked his lip thoughtfully. 'Of course, it isn't unknown for an

otherwise fit young man to drop dead of an unexpected heart attack,' he mused.

`But it's rather uncommon. And at such a crucial time, as well...'

`What are you trying to say?' Malvin asked, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

`How can you be sure it wasn't the stress of all this? Signing the peace treaty. Being **the** only man the Omwanar will trust? The strain must have been intolerable, even **for** Simmons.'

`Hnun,' said the Doctor.

Lyshur Lysus was staring closely at Steven. At least, Steven assumed the alien was

staring at him — a rather odd-looking globule in the centre of the thing's

transparent mantle had swivelled around and some sort of lens appeared to be focusing on him. Steven tried a friendly smile, and then realised that any facial

expression could be misinterpreted. Baring his teeth like that; the Omwanar

might assume it was aggressive. But then, the Omwanar didn't appear to have any

kind of teeth, and therefore might not even recognise the expression at all.

'Hike you, Space-General Simmons,' gurgled the alien suddenly.

Steven leaned back in his seat slightly. 'Well, I like you too, er, Lyshur. May I call **you** Lyshur?'

Ìs abbreviation of my title a sign of affection?'

`Not exactly. But it means we're friends, I suppose.'

Ì understand.'

`You can call me Steven. I mean Robert! Robert. Bob, if you like.' Steven tugged

at the collar of his borrowed uniform, aware that he was sweating profusely.

`Bob,' said Lyshur Lysus slowly, 'I cannot help noticing that you are... oozing.'

Ìt's very warm in here.'

Ì, also, am oozing.'

Ì had noticed. Nothing wrong with that.' Steven frowned. 'Is there?'

`Nothing at all. Not in my condition.'

`Good. What condition?'

Lyshur Lysus bubbled happily. 'I am pregnant, Bob.'

Steven practically choked. 'Well! Congratulations!' he gasped, and then

laughed. 'That's marvellous.'

'It is the reason that I am here.'

Ì thought you were here to sign the peace treaty? Talking of which...'

Lyshur Lysus held up the tip of a tentacle in a clear request for silence. 'You do

not understand. When an Omwanar is carrying its young, it must seek a warm,

safe place to lay its eggs.'

`That sounds sensible.'

`Naturally. Hormonal changes within an egg-bearing Omwanar dramatically

reduce tension levels. Sometimes we are overcome with an urge to conciliate. And

as Omwanar leader, I must take that impulse to its fullest conclusion.'

Steven thought about this for a moment. 'You mean, you've agreed to stop the

war and sign the peace treaty because you're... expecting?'

`Precisely.'

`Then congratulations are doubly in order, Lyshur. I can't think of a better

reason for suing for peace. I hope you and your children will live long and happy

and safe lives.'

`That is most generous, Bob.'

Steven nodded, smiling. Things really were going remarkably well; he was

almost starting to relax. As far as these Omwanar were concerned, he felt that their reputation as paranoid warmongers may have been exaggerated. But that is often

the way of things in war. In actual fact, the Omwanar were proving to be, well,

rather human. Despite their massive cultural and physiological differences, he and

Lyshur Lysus seemed to be getting along just fine. He had to admit that he rather

liked her. Him. It.

Which made the fact that he was deluding the Omwanar feel so much worse. It

was starting to feel like a personal betrayal, rather than a risky bit of subterfuge.

The Doctor always maintained that the end never justified the means. Or rather

that it rarely justified the means. In fact, when Steven thought about it, he realised that the **Doctor generally changed his opinion on that particular edict to suit the circumstances. Even so, it simply didn't feel right to deceive Lyshur Lysus like this.**

But, although Steven was satisfied that he had managed to make friends with the

alien, could he possibly risk telling the truth now? That might not only jeopardise the relationship; it could jeopardise the whole galaxy.

Suddenly he was starting to perspire again.

`You are oozing, Bob.'

`Yes,' said Steven. 'I know.'

`Then you must know what **I am going to** ask of you.'

Ì' m sorry?'

`There is no need to **apologise, Bob. I understand that you must feel nervous.**

This is a difficult time for both of us.'

`You're telling me!'

`No, Bob. I am asking you. I... I cannot wait much longer. The time for seeding is close.'

`Seeding?'

Lyshur Lysus rose slightly, gases bubbling through the thick slime that covered

its mantle. The transparent 'eye' in the centre of the membrane seemed to

contract, as if fixing Steven with a baleful glare. 'Bob, I feel as if I know you well.

Accordingly, I have a favour to ask.'

Èrm, does this involve seeding?'

`Yes, it does. Bob, I would be honoured if you would allow me to lay my eggs

inside you.'

`This man was murdered,' announced the Doctor, wagging a finger at Space-

General Simmons's corpse. A sudden, cold-as-metal silence filled the anteroom.

`Murdered?' gasped Harlow in disbelief. 'What on Earth makes you say

that?'

`There is evidence of deliberate poisoning.'

`Don't be ridiculous,' snapped Malvin. 'What could anyone hope to gain by

killing the only man capable of securing a peace deal with the Omwanar?'

`What indeed?' The Doctor's beady eyes screwed up as a smile flashed

momentarily across his face. 'What could anyone hope to gain — except war?'

`No one wants war,' said Harlow quietly.

Ì wouldn't be so sure about that!' The Doctor turned to face Malvin. 'Would

you?'

Ì've had enough of you, old man,' said Malvin, suddenly drawing his service

pistol and levelling it at the Doctor.

The Doctor stiffened, but stared defiantly back at the space-colonel. 'More

killing, hmm?'

`Simmons had to go,' Malvin spat. 'He could have cost us the war.'

'Us?'

The Earth Military Union.'

Èmu?'

ÈMU,' Malvin confirmed. His pistol never wavered; it was aimed squarely at the

Doctor's head. 'Earth can win this war. The Omwanar only agreed to a peace deal

to save their slimy necks. If we sign a peace treaty now, it will allow

the Omwanar time to regroup and counterattack. That must not happen.'

`But the peace treaty will prevent that,' insisted Harlow.

Ìf you believe that then you're a bigger fool than this old man.'

Harlow's voice dropped to a whisper. 'Let me get this straight. You killed Space-

General Simmons?'

Malvin nodded briefly. Òmwanar neurotoxin, administered on board his

flagship just before he transferred down to this rock.'

`You're setting them up!'

Ìm

winning the war,' Malvin retorted. 'Everything is going according to plan.'

Èxcept for one thing,' said the Doctor triumphantly. 'You couldn't have planned

for Steven and me being here!'

`You mean I couldn't have planned it better, old man.'

`Nonsense,' the Doctor said, although his smile was fading. 'Steven's in there

now, with the Omwanar leader. Signing the peace treaty on Simmons's behalf.'

`You don't think he'll actually succeed?' sneered Malvin. 'I only let you go ahead

with this insane plan because it was so ridiculously perfect! They'll find Simmons **dead —** poisoned by the Omwanar. Then the Omwanar will discover your friend is 159

an impostor — an Earth assassin — and kill him. Don't you see? The peace treaty will be ruined. The war will continue. And we can press our advantage and wipe the

Omwanar from the face of the galaxy!'

Ì'm touched that you should consider me for the role of incubator for your young,

Lyshur,' said Steven carefully. 'But I honestly don't think I'm the man for the job.'

`Not true,' said the Omwanar. 'You are prefect, Bob. You are strong and

honourable. What better start could there be for my hatchlings? Warm meat for

them to feast upon at the moment of birth!'

Steven swallowed. 'Really, Lyshur. I can't.'

But the Omwanar would not be deterred. 'You must not refuse, Bob! Not only

would you be providing a ready supply of fresh meat, but you would also be

cementing the treaty between our peoples! The entire Omwanar Interest would

look upon you as a hero and saviour! They would sing your praises throughout the

37 star systems. Epic poems would be written in tribute to your name from here to

Tau Ceti.'

`Surely there must be someone else...?'

`No one! You are Earth's most trusted and honoured warrior! To give yourself in

this way would be the noblest of actions.'

Ìt would be madness,' Steven said. 'And as for being Earth's most trusted and

honoured warrior... well, Lyshur, I have to tell you something.'

`Yes?' Lyshur Lysus quivered and raised its many tentacles, the tips of which

were dripping with a gelatinous green substance. The very sight made Steven's

mouth go dry. 'You must be brief! I do not have long. My egg sac is distending.'

`Wait!'

Ì cannot!'

Steven covered his eyes. 'This is a nightmare!'

Lyshur Lysus rose up on a balloon of gas and its tentacles parted like a curtain

of snakes to reveal the egg sac beneath: a grey-veined membrane bulging with

hundreds of fist-sized eggs. Steven could see the tiny Omwanar embryos

squirming, wriggling and twisting inside the luminous pods.

He could feel himself starting to ooze again.

`The time is upon me, Bob! My hatchlings crave meat!'

Several things then happened at once. Steven stood up abruptly, sending his

chair crashing backwards. The door to the chamber hummed open and Rufus

Malvin burst in, holding a gun.

`Die, you alien filth!' cried Malvin, taking aim.

The Doctor and Harlow appeared behind him. 'Don't be a fool, man!' bellowed

the Doctor, grabbing at his arm. Malvin's aim was spoiled, but not enough. The

gun discharged, and the laser beam burned a hole straight through the

Omwanar

leader.

Lyshur Lysus twisted around in pain and confusion. 'What is this treachery?'

`Nor roared Steven, hurling himself across the desk at Malvin. He smashed into

the space-colonel, knocking the gun clean out of his hand

`Bob!' squealed the wounded Omwanar. It slithered over the table and wound its

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tentacles around the struggling men. The alien seemed to engulf them for a

moment, gurgling and slurping.

Harlow scooped up the fallen pistol, training it on the creature, but the Doctor pushed the gun down. 'Enough shooting!' he snarled, his eyes burning with

indignation. 'Don't you people ever learn?'

'look,' breathed Harlow, pointing at the Omwanar. Its tentacles had uncoiled,

allowing Steven to slip free.

The Doctor helped him to his feet. 'Are you all right, my boy? Steven?'

Steven nodded shakily. 'What about lyshur lysus?'

The Omwanar reared up, but it was clear that something was very wrong. Its

mantle was no longer clear — the transparent body was cloudy, and a milky liquid was streaming from a gaping hole.

'lyshur

!' Steven turned back to the Doctor, stricken. 'Doctor! We must do

something! She's expecting!'

'My dear boy, I'm so sorry...'

lyshur lysus sank back against the table, trailing tentacles. With a spluttering gurgle, it turned to Steven. 'Do not concern yourself, Bob, my friend. It is... over.'

'But your eggs!' Steven knelt down next to the alien. 'The seeding...'

'Is done.'

Steven turned to look at the man who had shot lyshur. The space-colonel lay on

his back, a look of terrified agony on his face. His uniform tunic was torn open, allowing a grotesquely swollen stomach to be seen. The pale skin of the man's

abdomen pulsed as the Omwanar young moved inside.

Steven turned back to lyshur. 'You laid them inside him?'

'An ignoble decision, I know. But in the heat of the moment... I could not let it be you, Bob.'

Steven felt his throat tighten. 'But what about the songs of praise? The epic

poems?'

'An exaggeration. A pathetic and unworthy deception. Forgive me.'

'I don't know what to say.'

'Say nothing.'

'But you've been shot. You're wounded. You need help!'

The Omwanar trembled and sagged still further. More fluid bubbled from its

cloudy internal organs. 'It is of no matter. The wound was not in itself fatal. But I'm afraid death is a natural part of the egg-laying process. I have fulfilled both my duty and my biological

function.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Thank you for all your help, Bob.'

'There's something you should know,' began Steven thickly. But he was stopped

by the Doctor's hand on his shoulder.

'There's nothing else you can do, my boy. Except one thing.' He held out a

document and a pen.

Steven stared at it for a long moment.

'The peace treaty must be signed!' declared Lyshur lysus. It raised a shivering

tentacle, but lacked the strength to hold the pen. 'I am sorry. I am too weak...'

Àllow me,' said the Doctor gently. He took the pen and scrawled a complex

series of symbols across the bottom of the paper.

`Most kind,' whispered Lyshur.

Steven slowly took the pen and, in a rather wobbly fashion, wrote 'Robert

Simmons' underneath the Doctor's immaculate forgery of the Omwanar's

signature.

Immediately the Doctor straightened and handed the document over to Harlow

`You know what to do with this, young man,' he said. Now get cracking!'

Harlow glanced at the Doctor and Steven, and then at the Omwanar leader. With

a decisive nod, he stepped over the body of Malvin and headed for the exit.

`Peace in our time?' wondered Steven bitterly as Harlow left.

`Let's hope so, my boy. Let's hope so!'

Steven looked down at the body of Rufus Malvin, which lay twitching and

jerking as the alien hatchlings inside set about their ravenous business. 'That

could've been me.'

The Doctor patted him on the shoulder. 'Don't get sentimental, my boy.'

Steven turned back to Lyshur Lysus. The Omwanar had collapsed into a

motionless heap ofjelly. Dead.

15.21

One Wednesday Afternoon

Alison Jacobs

Nottinghamshire, 1967

It was the first proper spring day of the year and dawdling in the sunshine made **me late. I was** coming out of the supermarket, my knees creaking, and I thought,

'Better hurry home.' Which is always when things go wrong, isn't it?

I had my **head down,** checking my bags, making sure I'd got everything, but he **can't have been looking** where he was going either. We bumped hard. I staggered back and so did he. I dropped my bags, and his hands came flying out of his

pockets, scattering stuff everywhere.

'Oh, my goodness, I am sorry. Here, let me get that Turlough, give me a hand,

will you?'

He talked very BBC and he looked like a gent, though a bit of a hippy too — **like that David McCallum, only more lanky. His clothes were half teddy boy and half a pair of pyjamas. Must be from London, I thought I hadn't seen the boy, Turlough, though how I missed a carrot-top like him, I don't know. He was wearing a school uniform — not one I recognised — and a scowl.**

'It wasn't my fault,' he said as he bent down and started stuffing things into my bags. 'What were you looking at?' By the accent, I guessed public school.

'At that sign.' The older man nodded towards it as he helped me up. 'I must

apologise. I'm the Doctor and this is Turlough. And he's right, I wasn't looking where I was going.'

'I' m Peggy Garratt,' I said, shaking his held-out hand. 'It's only the

International, the supermarket.' I added, stating the obvious. Well, it did have big glass windows with posters of their special offers.

'It reminded me of something,' the Doctor said.

The International's sign is a globe with no continents, just lines of latitude and longitude. It's the sort of thing you *see* **a lot these** days.

'International?' Turlough glanced up from my bags. 'That's like calling the GPO

galactic.' He looked closer. 'UNIT?'

The Doctor nodded.

Turlough groaned. 'Pm getting egg all over my fingers.'

The Doctor crouched down to help him. 'You pack the shopping,

I'll sort out

what's mine.' He looked up at me and smiled, very pleasantly. 'You must allow me to make this up to you. Perhaps a quick spin around the Milky Way?'

'Milky Way?' I asked. 'The chocolate bar?'

'Doctor,' the boy warned and then said to me, 'Don't go. You never know where **you'll end up.'**

The Doctor carried on. 'Or perhaps tea in the park? There's a little cafe by the bandstand, I expect you know it. That's really why we're here.'

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Tor tea?' I asked.

`To get some fresh air. The last two planets we visited had barely breathable

atmospheres... which is why Turlough's so grumpy.'

`Not without reason,' Turlough said. 'They stank of methane.'

I had thoughts of lSD and loony bins but they seemed so nice — the Doctor at

any rate. 'I'm afraid I've things to do before I get tea.' I hesitated. 'It's spaghetti bolognese.'

He looked the sort who might eat spaghetti bolognese and paella and things I

hadn't heard of.

He licked his lips. 'I'm sure it will be lovely. There's only one egg broken. You

must let me give you this. As a replacement,' he added. Out of his pocket he pulled a large, turquoise egg. 'It has a very distinctive flavour, I hope you like it.'

`What's it from?' I asked. 'Some kind of fancy fowl?'

`No, a jobla.'

What that was, I didn't ask.

He picked up my bags. 'let me carry those for you.'

`No, thanks,' I said, taking them. 'I only live down the back.' We said goodbye

and I hurried off down the jitty to our house. It was starting to cloud over.

In the kitchen I took the shopping out of the bags and wiped the remnants of the

broken egg from everything. A tin of Spam had its label half off. I reached in for

the next thing. It was hard, a bit slippery and it rattled.

I heard the door go. 'Peggy? You there, duck?'

`Stan?' I called. 'You're early. Anything up?'

He *came* through, oil still on his hands. He's an engineer, my Stan, does a good job. 'Can't get anything moving at the factory, we've had to send everybody home.

I offered to stay but they need somebody from Sheffield and he can't get here till

tomorrow.'

`That's not good — but then, it's been a funny sort of day.'

He frowned. 'What's that you're holding?'

I looked down. They were beads, twisted round each other, browny-orange with

a real glow to them, joined by little gold links. I shook them out into a necklace.

They weren't a string but a net, all connected to each other. Antique for sure and, worse, valuable.

I sat down heavily. 'Must be the Doctor's.'

Stan pulled up the other chair. 'Doctor Gupta?'

I told him what'd happened.

Stan blew out a breath. 'Doesn't sound like he's local. Still, first thing is to

phone the Courier —' that's our local newspaper `— and put it in the lost-and-found column. Then I can tell the International, and we can always put a card in the

newsagents' window.'

I went for the phone. 'If I phone the paper now, it might get in tonight.

Tomorrow, anyway.'

Stan put the kettle on whilst I phoned the paper, but neither of us was very

happy.

`people will know we've got it,' he said, echoing my thoughts.

Ì'd trust the neighbours, but there are people...' I trailed off.

Stan picked it up. 'Wouldn't be good if it got nicked. We might be liable.'

'I don't think the Doctor'd blame us, but still, it'd be embarrassing. Ought to be

in the bank.'

He shook his head. 'We'd have to pay for that. I'm not sure we can afford it.'

So Stan took it, to store away in our little hidey-hole and then go to the

International and the newsagents before they shut.

I wish I'd wiped the egg off it properly. It was a pretty thing, I thought. It'd go just right with my new dress for the work's do. Chocolate rayon, like real silk. I

wondered if the Doctor would mind me wearing it. I'd only be borrowing, after all.

But then people really would know I'd got it.

The next minute, just as I was getting out the mince for the bolognese sauce, the

doorbell rang. Couldn't be Stan, he had his key.

As I opened the door, the Doctor pushed past me. 'Sorry, terribly sorry.'

Turlough was behind him, grinning. As I turned, I heard a thunderous noise, like

the RAF going over. I glanced up — the skywas part clouded over now — and saw this triangular thing whizz by. It was like a Vulcan bomber, but purple. I did a double

take but it was gone. Must've been a trick of the light. I shut the door. The Doctor **had** a newspaper in his hand, looked like the Courier, and was flapping it about.

'You've come for your necklace.' That much was obvious, though how he'd

found me so fast... 'Did you ask at the International?'

'No, what? Sorry.'

The boy rolled his eyes. 'Have you got it?'

'It's terribly important, you see,' said the Doctor. 'I think we slipped in under

their noses — but they're here.'

'I think you'd better sit down,' I said. 'Why don't you go through to the parlour

and I'll put the kettle on.'

The Doctor smiled. 'I would love a cup of tea, but I'm afraid there's no time.'

'Because you messed up!' Turlough was halfway into the parlour.

The Doctor gave him a dirty look and they both sank into my armchairs. They

were rose chintz originally but I'd had them re-covered in something called 'Jazz'.

I didn't have to ask what was going on, he explained. 'What I said, about the two **previous** planets we visited...'

'**I** remember.'

'I wasn't joking. They really had the most awful atmospheres. But that didn't

stop the pair of them going to war — regularly.' He was leaning forward, looking **Tight in** my face. 'I managed to relieve the tension a little but as we were leaving I **Mw... an** opportunity. There's a necklace, it's over a thousand years old. It occupies a similar position to a crown in your history. I don't know how many

people have died trying to get their hands on it, but I thought if I removed —'

'**He** nicked it.' Turlough interrupted. 'lifted it, pinched it, half-inched it.

Snaffled it. Isn't it amazing how many words the English have for stealing? Must **my something about them.**'

`You Irish or something?' I asked.

`Not even close.'

`We're getting off the subject here.' The Doctor jumped up and started pacing

about the room, still flapping the newspaper.

I sat myself down on the arm of a chair. `So you picked it up and when we

bumped into each other, somehow it got out of your pocket and into my bag.'

Òh, yes.' He reached into the pocket and handed me a packet of

baking soda. 'I

believe this is yours. Though I could be wrong.'

I'd wondered where that had got to.

The Doctor checked the window. 'It wasn't intentional but when I realised what

had happened... Well, you're light years and millennia away from them. I didn't

think they'd even find it, let alone come and get it. They couldn't have, at the time.'

`How -' My nose twitched. I thought I could smell burning, but I hadn't started

cooking yet and there was no fire in the grate.

The boy looked me in the *eye.* He wasn't finding all this as funny as he was pretending to. The Doctor's a Time lord, we travel in time. They knew that, so

they started an arms race a bit like your nuclear bombs - only with time.'

`They can do that?'

`They can now - but they're not supposed to.' He gestured towards his friend.

`His lot are time's policemen. If they find out he's caused someone else to invent

time travel, especially for a war, he's in deep trouble.'

I was having a hard time taking all this in, and I was half distracted by one of

those concentrated patches of light you get sometimes when it's sunny. I hadn't

got a glass vase or anything it could be focusing through, but it was slowly

crossing the room.

I shook my head. 'What sort of trouble?'

The Doctor was talking. 'That hardly matters, they don't like me anyway, but

this time I'm afraid I've given them cause. Both sides are here this afternoon and

they'll tear the place apart if they don't get what they want. And, of course, if one side gets it and the other doesn't -'

`We're in the middle of another war.' I said. 'Oh!'

The light touched the mantelpiece, instantly setting on fire a photograph. The

Doctor grabbed it and threw it into the grate. I ran over, picked it out and began to blow on it.

Òh, Neville. That's the one we had taken when he graduated.' He looked lovely

in his robes, his father and me standing proudly next to him. I pulled myself up.

Òur Neville's a lecturer, he's a doctor too.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Good for him, not an easy thing to achieve in the 196os.'

Not from a home like this, he meant, though he was too polite to say it. But the

thought of another war, maybe bigger and worse than the last one, was rattling

round my brain and I said, 'We named him after Neville Chamberlain. All that

"peace in our time", that was what we wanted. Only Hitler wasn't - well, you know. I 'spose you think we were stupid.'

He put a hand on my shoulder. 'Chamberlain might have been wrong, but he

was wrong for the right reasons. That's something I can readily sympathise with.'

Turlough, behind us, harnimphed. 'Anyway, d'you think that constitutes an

attack or just a recce? Because I think we'd better get the necklace and get out of here.'

I put the photo down, the top corner all scorched, and looked out of the

window. It wasn't sunny, and had begun to spit. It didn't make sense: there was no sun for the light to come from. The clouds looked sort ofpearly, but I was probably imagining it.

The Doctor squeezed my shoulder. 'We need to get the necklace away from here.

Where is it, please?'

`Stan's taken it to hide,' I said. 'I can't get it without him '

`Can you find Stan?'

I nodded. Right now there was nothing I wanted to do more, but... 'I wish I

could have worn it.'

He frowned. 'You didn't?'

I blushed. 'I was thinking about borrowing it, for the dance next —'

The Doctor blanched, stopping me in my tracks, and Turlough mouthed, Òh.'

He held out the newspaper. It was folded out to reveal page 17, and I looked at the picture. There I was, with Stan at the work's do. I was in my new dress and wearing the necklace. I looked like a film star. Well, a middle-aged, hard-up film star. It wasn't possible. It hadn't happened yet. I checked the date.

`That's not tonight's, that's a week on Monday.'

À week on Monday?' The boy nearly fell off his chair laughing. 'Tegan told me

what she said about you and a broken clock.'

Ìt's not funny.' The Doctor was running his hand through his blond hair.

'Either we have a temporal paradox or this place could be wiped out. I thought they might change history, I didn't think I would.'

`No,' Turlough said, straightening up, 'but if the Time lords miss this one — oh, Lord, I'll have to go back to school. And you...' He looked out of the window at the terrace opposite. 'Is it worth saving?'

'Furlough.'

'I only asked.'

I heard the sound of a jet again and the Doctor pushed both of us towards the

door. 'We need to find it, now.'

I grabbed a mac as we went and struggled into it, as it was starting to rain hard, heavy drops.

`Which way?' he asked.

`Towards the park.'

We went down the jitty and came out by the International. There weren't nearly

so many people about now, because of the weather, I supposed. Funny how it can

turn so fast at this time of year. I looked round for Stan but he wasn't about.

They were heading towards the park without me giving them any directions.

Maybe they *had* had tea by the bandstand; it's a nice little cafe. I hurried to catch them up. Sometimes I thought I saw those pools of light that didn't come from the sun, washing over the pavement with the rain. I heard something like jets in the sky and then thèder-der' of a fire engine some streets away. Over towards the

factory, I could see a column of smoke going up, smudged by the wet. I wondered

aloud if it was connected or just some horrid coincidence.

`What do they make' the Doctor asked.

`Toiletries for Boots the Chemist, but they made explosives in the war.' I told

him about the problems they'd had, and how Stan had come home early.

He nodded thoughtfully.

Ìt's never a coincidence,' Turlough said.

I saw something dip under the clouds, coloured and runny like a soap bubble.

It scudded along for a minute, then was gone. I pulled my coat tighter around me.

I could smell the smoke from the factory, it was sort of acrid, like the singed

feathers my grandma used to wave under your nose if you felt a bit faint. I always

hated that. Then I realised I could smell burnt meat as well. My heart nearly

stopped. Hadn't Stan said they'd sent everyone home?

We were coming up to a T-junction with the Memorial Park on the opposite side

of the road and I saw the ducks flapping and squawking into the sky, like when a

dog's after them, and — zap — one fell. Instant roast duck. Can't get that at the

supermarket.

I stopped, shuddering. Don't know why the ducks scared me more than

anything else had but — zap — there went another one, and another. There were

men in the park. They were wearing suits and sunglasses, and carrying ray guns.

The guns clicked and sparked like toys and the ducks fell. It was just target

practice to them. I was angry. I went to hurry forwards but the Doctor put his hand on my arm.

'I know, but be careful. I doubt you mean any more to them.'

I clenched my jaw and nodded. At least it wasn't people.

`Which way do we go?' he asked.

`Through there.' I could see the bandstand in the distance with the café beside

it. Two or three of those lights reflected off the pond.

Ìs there another way round?' Turlough asked. I told him one but he said, 'That's

still a bit close. Can we do it without being seen?'

`There's a longer way but it'll take time.'

Ànd you're not going to tell us where we're going, are you?'

`She has that prerogative,' the Doctor told him.

`We could go to the newsagents,' I said. 'Stan might be there.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'You don't think he will be and I'd rather see where

the necklace is hidden. We need to get it away from here.'

Ànd it's not like Stan can protect you,' Turlough added.

A girl in a shiny red raincoat walked along the street then turned

through the

Armistice Gates into the park. She looked nervously at the group of men, but

they'd stopped firing and she carried on walking. I couldn't tell if she could see the dead ducks — she must've been able to smell them. The men ogled her, but let her

go past.

The Doctor opened his mouth to speak and Turlough groaned. 'They'd

recognise us.'

Not necessarily,' the Doctor said.

`Yes, they would.'

`But they don't want us dead yet. Not until they have what they came for.'

But I was looking at the men with the sunglasses. I saw that one of them was

still looking at the girl. He raised his gun.

The Doctor saw it too. 'Hello,' he called. 'looking for something?'

The girl glanced round. The men started firing. She started to run. Turlough

and the Doctor charged them. They fired ahead of us and behind us, close, zipping

off the brickwork and the pavement. Turlough dived one way, I had to go the other;

I barely kept my feet. Through the Armistice Gates and into the park, we all kept

running, me puffing and blowing. The girl was away, long gone — I could just see

the red glint in the distance.

The Doctor grabbed hold of me. He pulled me through the crowd and now I

could see that there was a police box in the shadow of the café. It hadn't been there before. Good idea, I thought, call the police. The Doctor fumbled a key and

unlocked the box, which surprised me for two seconds — maybe he was the police,

I thought — before he pushed me inside.

I was in a big white room with circles on the walls and a giant mushroom-shaped

control panel in the centre. I just stood there.

The Doctor was calling out, `Turlough! Turlough!' but Turlough wasn't there.

I just stood, staring. There was another door in the far wall, but not much else.

He ran to the mushroom, which was covered with controls and switches. The

door slammed shut and a television set came to life, showing us the outside. The

picture rotated and I realised the camera must be in the lamp. I was inside a police box. Only I wasn't. The voice in my head said, 'This is real.'

'He'll be all right,' the Doctor was muttering. 'He's good at this.'

All this was strange to me, but I knew whose side I wanted to be on. Because it

mattered. Because ducks were getting killed and it might be people next. And if

there were wars on other planets, there'd be people getting killed there too, even

if they didn't look like us or talk like us.

The words spilled out of me. Ì'd love to ask what's going on, but I

shouldn't,

should I? Not now. Not till we have time. Stan was going to hide it on the

allotments. I can't get it without him, it'll be too high for me to reach, but you're tall enough.'

He smiled at me. 'Thank you. I thought you knew.'

'I didn't lie to you.'

'No, you were careful. And I approve of questions, I just wish more people had

a sense of the right moment.'

'I do have one question,' I said. 'You said about them tearing the town apart,

changing history. What's to stop them?'

He nodded. 'That's one reason we need to be quick. How long did you have it

before I came? An hour? Two?'

doubt it was thirty minutes.'

He grinned. 'Excellent. Do you know how hard it is to hit a thirty-minute spot in

the lifetime of a planet?'

I had to smile too. `No, but I can guess it's difficult. If you can get the necklace away from here, they won't come back, is that right?' He nodded. 'But what's to

stop them stopping you picking it up —'

`That's my problem,' he said, holding a hand up.

Ànd the temporal paradox?' I asked, hoping I'd got the words right. 'Me not

having worn the necklace to the dance?'

He sighed. 'It's not such a big one, I'll find some way round it.'

He went to the far door — you couldn't get all this in a police box, not any way —

then stopped and turned back. `No, hang on, I've a better idea. Have you got your

breath back?'

`Just about.' I knew we were going to have to run.

`When I open the door, follow me. Quickly.'

He flicked a half dozen switches on the mushroom and the picture on the screen

whirled round. A real grampus wheeze started up and the floor began to shake.

Òops, don't want that.' He flicked more switches. I could still see the park

whizzing past, but now I could see a kaleidoscope of lights like the one in my front room. The Doctor suddenly opened the door and we were running out into a

firework display.

The men with the sunglasses were turning and twisting, trying to shoot at

lights, and there were lights everywhere. I led us down the path, not looking if

anyone was following. There were pools and pools of light, by the path, by the

pond, some headed our way and some the other. I remembered the photograph

burning.

The allotments are on the far side of the park. There was one old bloke in the

corner, but I couldn't see who it was. I pointed the Doctor towards the middle,

towards the concrete wall in the big, grassy hump.

Àir-raid shelter,' I gasped.

Now I was fumbling for a key; I had the spare. We were in quick and I switched

the light on. 'Stan gets this 'cause he's committee secretary.'

We ran down the steps and I could smell the produce stored from the autumn.

Stan's tools were stacked up neatly in one corner, except the ones laid out on the

workbench to be repaired. He painted the concrete vaulting last year. It's low

enough to reach with a step ladder if you're Stan's height. It's got ribs along to

strengthen it and I pointed to the one in the middle.

`There's a little gap above that one. It's easier to get at from the far side.'

The Doctor stood on tiptoe and his fingers just reached in, he didn't even need

the ladder. He pulled the necklace out and looked at it, smiling sadly.

`Seemed like a good idea at the time, as ever. Come on, I need to find Turlough

and get this away. And make sure everyone out there knows I have.'

As I went outside, a light skimmed across my face, stinging as it touched me. They

were all there — spots of light gliding about on the ground and men in suits waving their ray guns, trampling the young plants and snapping the bean canes. I

wondered how you'd shoot a piece of light but I supposed they must

have a way.

The Doctor cleared his throat and held his hands up, though I couldn't see the

necklace. 'ladies and gentlemen, I think we all know why we're here. Perhaps we

Could find a better place to discuss it.'

I wondered if there were any ladies present except me, and what a better place

would look like.

`Give it to us, Doctor,' one of the men growled.

Pools of light clustered around his feet as they did around the Doctor's. There

was engine noise above us.

`What do you think would happen if I did?' the Doctor asked.

`We can destroy them.'

`Perhaps I should just let you get on with it and then we can walk away.' He

glanced at me and we both knew that wasn't going to work. 'This lady has nothing

to do with your quarrel,' the Doctor continued. 'She came into it quite by accident.

If you let her go, I'll talk to you.'

`No, you won't,' the man said. 'You're the trickster.' Neither lot believed him.

There were lights round my feet now, moving and swirling.

I saw something behind them, a flash of red hair peeking out from beside one

of the sheds. It was Turlough and he had Stan with him; they were sneaking closer, **though** what they could do against all this lot, I didn't know.

The lights pressed in closer and the man said, 'We will start by killing this

woman, then we will destroy this place if you do not give us the necklace.'

I stepped towards the lights and the men. 'And what will you do if he gives it you?

Tear the place apart anyway? Tear somebody else's town apart? What's it all for?'

There were looking at me now and I hoped the Doctor - somebody, at any rate

might do something with the distraction.

`What is it to you?' the man asked me.

Ì've lived through a war. I've seen people like you and what you can do. We

stopped them and we'll stop you. Now, are you prepared to talk? Because if you're **not,** you can both go away. Or else we'll make you.'

I wished I could see the Doctor's face. What I could see were Stan and Turlough

coming closer, but they were too far away to tell what they were thinking. Probably **thought** I'd gone mad. I expect I had.

The lights were still zipping around the Doctor like fireflies and some of the **men** were looking at him, menacingly. I pulled myself up as tall as I could and **said,** 'It's nothing to do with him, he's just visiting. It's my town and it's me you **deal** with.'

I gasped as the light burned my leg. Wasn't bad, I've had worse off the cooker,

but I never saw it coming. The man stepped forward, gun raised and so was his **other** hand. He was either going to slap me or shoot me.

`Wait,' the Doctor shouted. 'I have the necklace. You deal with me.'

He was waving it above his head, above their heads. If nothing else, I think we'd **confused** them.

`look, if we take this elsewhere...' the Doctor was saying. He was worried about

me, bless him.

The man lowered his gun but grabbed my arm. The two of us were encircled by

the lights. 'She's my hostage.'

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Suddenly, Stan was running out into the middle of them, pushing the man

aside, not bothered about the gun. I realised he didn't know.

`Mind the gun!' I shouted. 'It's real. And stay away from the lights.'

I saw a light run up the Doctor's arm but he ignored it. Turlough cried out but

he was in the middle of things, I couldn't reach him. Stan was trying to get me

away. The lights were all over the place, but the men were shooting back. One zap

turned them into a pillar of glass - very pretty - and the second cracked and

shattered it. The lights had turned up the power, must have; one bloke was turned

to ash. I saw the necklace fly into the air - whether the Doctor threw it or what, I don't know. Turlough caught it clean and waved it around.

Òver here, you idiots,' he shouted.

He threw it in the air again, so they could see it, tossed it to the Doctor who

tossed it back to him. They were making a big play of it, Turlough shouting

insults; they had everybody's attention. We'd got turned around, facing the air-

raid shelter, and we were between the park and the Doctor and Turlough. They

began to run past us.

`Bye.' Turlough called. He was half scowling, half laughing.

`We'll see they don't come back,' the Doctor whispered as he brushed past

I knew he would. They were running towards the park with the men and the

lights following. Stan pulled me back into the air-raid shelter and from the

doorway we watched the spaceships leave. I hadn't even noticed them, hanging

above us, the purple triangles and the big soap bubble.

Ìs that it?' I asked.

Seemed like it was. It was raining harder now but we walked home the long way

round, avoiding the park. I knew the police box would be gone, I didn't need to

look. Stan and I filled each other in. Turlough had found him by the International

and told him robbers were after us. Which they were, sort of.

When we got home, I shook my mac out and something rattled in the pocket I

don't know why I smiled; I suppose I felt trusted. I lifted the necklace out

Stan still hadn't really got his head round it 'The Doctor -'

Ì' m not sure it was.' I sat down in the kitchen chair. 'That Turlough's a good

boy underneath, for all his lip. He knew the Doctor'd be in trouble if I didn't -

don't - wear it for the photo.'

I realised the paper was still sat in the parlour and went and got it

`That's really u0' Stan said.

`You know it is.'

`You look very nice.' He put his arm around me. 'You're going to do it, aren't

you?'

Ì have to. The Doctor's in trouble, well... he's needed. Somewhere.'

He smiled. 'You never change.'

I went in the sitting room and dug in the magazine rack.

`What are you looking for?'

`Monday's Courier. Last Monday's.' I pulled it out and handed it to him. 'They're

running a trip to Cromer the day after the dance. Got a nice long pier at Cromer,

and if we threw it off at high tide...' I sighed. 'I'd love to keep it Keep it safe.'

He took it and started to flick through, finding the advert. I went back into the

kitchen, to my cooking. 'I think I'm hungry now. I'm doing spaghetti. Did I say

that?'

He followed me in. 'No, you never had a chance.' He cut out the coupon and put

It on the table to fill it in. `D'you think we'll need to move house? In

case they come back? And maybe we should tell Neville.'

`Tell him what, exactly?'

We looked at each other and smiled. I didn't know what we'd done, exactly, but

I felt good about it. The jobla egg still poked out of my shopping bag, something

to remember them by.

I got out the mince and the tinned tomatoes and put them into a pan.

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16.37

How You Get There

Simon Guerrier

A fat blob of rain obscured the time. He tried to rub it away and it burst, smearing across the digital display: 16.37. The rain had already started, pattering vaguely

down from the greying sky. He glanced again at the timetable, trying to gauge how late he would be. Would there be time? The rush hour had begun. Rush hours, he

thought, plural. And 'rush' was the wrong word, too. This was the slowest part of

the day, even on a Saturday.

The Doctor snapped his watch shut and swung the chain around his finger. The

watch arced neatly up and over, gliding into his breast pocket. His eyes darted left and right, checking who had seen. He liked to play to an audience. The other

people at the bus stop had their faces bowed. With a sigh, the Doctor lifted his

umbrella from the crook of his arm and unfurled it.

No bus came. He leant out into the unmoving traffic, staring up the hill. A few

of the others waiting looked up and round, hoping he'd seen something coming.

Nothing. Their heads drooped sadly down again.

The lights further up the road changed to red. Traffic edged forward from a

queue round the corner, up and to the left on Champion Park. There was no room

for them. The Doctor could sense the cross, caged people inside, green-lit at last, yet only able to squash up behind another avenue of unmoving vehicles. How long

had they been stuck on that last stretch of road? Creeping agonisingly by the dark

edifice of the Salvation Army headquarters and Denmark Hill train station, while

on the pavements beside them mothers and children overtook them at a stroll.

What a miserable way to travel.

Handbrakes clucked off as the cars ahead nosed forward, maybe getting two

hundred yards before halting again. The Doctor's eyes lit up as he spotted a taxi,

but its light was out and he saw the passenger snuggled in the back. Besides, he'd

spent his last few euro on a pre-pay ticket for the 185. He could do nothing else.

He would have to be patient.

No bus came. He had meant to get the train, of course. The 16.17 to Victoria had

been ideal, dropping him off with more than half an hour to spare. He

hadn't

planned for engineering works. He'd thought london had finally done away with

those.

The spotting of rain became drizzle. The traffic lights changed again, trapping

cars between lanes. Horns and voices swore. Cars pushed up close to let others

through. No one was going anywhere fast. No one was going anywhere.

The Doctor's nostrils flared at a sudden, sweet odour: blackcurrant and

mushrooms. A bus! It ploughed majestically down its designated lane, puffing out

the rich, organic stink of recycled fuels. The others at the bus stop all leaned out to see it coming. A 484, 'Camberwell' in yellow letters in the window. Terminating

at the next stop, no good to anyone.

The Doctor stepped back to let the bus draw in, and almost fell over an elderly

woman right behind him. He flustered an apology, and she smiled up at him. She

looked worn out. Her wrinkles told of long years of kindness and concern. Her

shoulders were speckled with rain. She made no move for this bus, so the Doctor

held his arm out, sharing his umbrella with her. Her eyes twinkled. She took a step forward, nestling with him under the canopy.

Waiting

' long?' she said, her drawl South london and Jamaica.

`Fifteen minutes.'

she said. 'They meant to come every twelve. An' when they do come up,

they come in threes. Reckon that's them being funny with us.'

Ìt's economics,' he said, staring up the line of cars. 'Supply and demand.'

She blinked at him He needed no more prompting.

Ìmagine you have three buses, all twelve minutes apart. And the first bus takes

three minutes picking up its passengers. The second bus is then just nine minutes

behind. Yes?'

`Should get here quicker then.'

`Well, yes. And no. The second bus turns up, and there are fewer passengers to

collect. So it moves off straight away. If that keeps happening, stop after stop, the second bus will catch up the first'

`You get one bus crammed full of people, and one right behind it all empty!'

He smiled. 'There's a reason for everything. Somewhere.'

The old woman's eyes were wide. 'I tell my husband, next time. He's always one

for answers.' She hesitated. londoners were wary of strangers, the Doctor knew

It didn't do to start a conversation on public transport. One of the most densely

populated places on the planet and they had a village mentality. A hundred tiny

villages, all different characters, all squodged up together. That was london all

over. They were fiercely protective of their own space, their privacy, savage about territory and their postcodes. Perhaps that was how they survived.

The old woman, however, gave up a morsel. 'He's in the hospital here.'

Ì'm sorry to hear that,' he said, letting her share her woes.

`His bones. Had terrible trouble with 'em all his life.'

The Doctor smiled, sadly.

`You been visiting too?'

Òther side of the road,' he said. On the corner opposite them stood a tall,

ornately wrought totem pole, a vent for the sewers below. Behind this, sprawled

the complex of buildings that made up the psychiatric unit.

'I...' said the old woman, and faltered. He shouldn't have been surprised.

Mental illness had been in the *news,* the latest target of tabloid spleen. The medical staff had been grateful to share their fears about new initiatives, imposed in light of 'public concern'. Random and reactionary, the measures made

nothing any better. The patients were the ones who really suffered. It always hit the ones most in need.

`He's all right really. Always had funny ideas,' said the Doctor. The old woman

seemed relieved. 'Thought he could control the weather, that sort of thing.'

She ducked her hand out from under the umbrella, checking the status of the

rain. 'I'd have brought a coat if they'd forecast this,' she said. 'Perhaps your

friend's to blame!' She grinned up at him, her face radiant. He doubted she smiled

very often, not recently. She should.

`Not this time,' he said.

No bus came. He could do nothing about it. But, while he was here...

`Tell me about your husband, Elsie,' he said.

She never asked how he knew her name.

Elsie told him everything. Her husband, his illness, their son who *never* called, the grandson she'd lost all contact with. The little man made it easy. Her worries

poured out

His bus appeared, up the road. Gently, he took her hand.

Ìt's been a pleasure,' he said. Elsie felt her heart sink. He couldn't go now, she

still had so much to say. How long since she'd last spoken to someone, been

heard? Sure, she shared cursory words with the nurses all the time. And

occasionally they still had checkout girls on in the supermarket. She always went

to them if she could, just for that momentary contact with another human being.

She hated dealing with the self-service machines they usually had. She hated the

machines around her husband's bed, too. She hated them breathing for him. She

hated feeling like she should talk to them, not the cold, unhearing body on the

bed. She'd never realised how angry they made her, not until now. He'd awakened

something in her. She suddenly felt alive!

He stepped back and doffed his hat to her, making it dance up his arm. Her dad

had had a hat like that He'd been another one able to make her laugh.

The man joined the huddle round the doors to his bus. The rain was getting

worse, bedraggling people and blotching their skin. Elsie watched the man let

other people shove by. Why bother pushing, she thought. It didn't get you where you were going any faster. Your pick of the seats would still be torn and dirty

fabric, plastered over with chewing gum.

Further up the road, another bus appeared, nosing out from round the corner.

She squinted to read the display, looking for the shape of the words, not individual letters. 'Oxford Circus'.

`Hey!' she called. 'Mister! Sir!' People looked round. She didn't care. He turned,

surprise and worry on his face. Perhaps he thought she would kiss him. 'My bus is

right behind!' she said. It seemed so silly, so fleeting. People were staring at her, some jabbing out elbows to herd her from their way.

The man mouthed, 'Thank you', and let the tide wash him up into the bus.

The 176 crawled nearer. Elsie put her arm out, but there were others ahead of

her, flagging it down. She looked up. The man had taken the front seat upstairs.

It had been her favourite spot when she was small, the one with the best view. He

perched next to some angry-looking youth with headphones on,

bassline no doubt

thumping. She could almost hear it in the street. The man hunched over,

scrutinising an old-fashioned pocket watch. His face was grim, with none of the

sparkle and energy he'd had when they spoke. He looked like someone she knew.

Someone she'd once seen.

Of course, she thought. In church they had a statue of St Christopher, patron

saint of travellers. He was a thin, crooked figure, bent over under the weight of the Christ-child and all the world's suffering and sin. The man's expression was the

same.

He looked out, saw her. For a second he looked guilty, like a child caught

thieving biscuits. The bus growled off towards the city. Before he vanished from

her life, the man winked down at her, impishly. Elsie couldn't help but grin back.

She tottered after her own bus. The rain fell ever more heavily, and the people

shoved each other to get aboard. Some looked down at her. And despite

themselves, when they met her eyes, they couldn't help grinning too.

For the first time in too many years, Elsie sat upstairs.

The bus glided to the lights at Camberwell Green. The Doctor looked down on the

traffic, queuing alongside the bus lane. Ahead of them, a Golf had

used the lane to overtake, and now couldn't get back in among the other cars. Drivers pretended

not to see, ignoring the Golf's increasingly pushy feints and nudges forward. A

sudden flash: a camera, set up by the lights, had caught the offending motorist.

The Doctor shook his head sadly. These days the fines were crippling.

The bus turned left, leaving the traffic behind. Camberwell New Road was clear,

and the bus picked up speed. The Doctor watched out the window, passing a

modern school and then old-fashioned terraces, all converted into flats. The rain

continued, and the Doctor felt the bus strain against a gathering wind. The

pavements outside were clear of people — pedestrians had all found shelter.

Apart from the thudding bass beside him, the bus was quiet. The Doctor turned

round in his seat to look back at his fellow passengers. They stared into space.

Some glanced at him, meeting his gaze, then quickly looked away. They actually

avoided contact. For a moment he was surprised, thought it rude, but even people

who were clearly in couples or groups of friends were silent. He saw it for what it was: mutual respect. Their silence was acknowledgement of each other's own

space.

Directly behind him sat a mother and child. The little boy looked bored out of

his mind. That would not do at all.

You're invisible when you're with your son, until he misbehaves. When he's good,

strangers feel free to coo over him, talk to him, pat him on the head. They never

even look at you. When he was a baby, you couldn't walk five steps without some

random well-wisher flagging you down, sticking their nose into his pram. Now he

can answer their questions himself, you don't even get asked about him. It's

always the same.

This guy, clowning about for Charlie's amusement, is different. He tries to

involve you, too. He's going to do some magic trick, the sort of stuff your brother used to do. 'I need an assistant,' he says, and hands you an old two-pence piece.

You feel like such an idiot, feeling everybody's eyes on you as you sit there, playing along. You don't say anything.

Charlie loves it, though. He craves attention. Nearly five and he still wants

cuddles. He comes to find you in the middle of the night, sneaking into bed,

curling up around you. Of course you don't mind, really. But what about when

you've got someone else there? It'll happen some day. Someone will ask you out.

Someone will buy you flowers. Maybe when Charlie's older, at school, not hanging

on you all the time. He scares them off, the age he's at now.

The clown closes his hand over your fingertips, where you're holding the coin.

You feel an electric tingle, a nervous thing like when you think your mobile's going **off and** it's not. The man opens his fingers out, showing you he's not hiding anything. And the coin has gone. He can't have palmed it — you know about

palming from your brother's lame tricks. His hand really is empty.

Ì've your full attention?' he says. You're not sure where his accent's from, but

it's not local.

`Where is it?' you ask, betraying your interest. Your stop is coming up.

look in your sleeve,' he says. You raise your arm. Something sticks out of the

cuff a slender green stalk. You don't understand. You pull on the stalk and out **pops** a bunch of flowers. Pretty white ones with yellow hearts like giant daisies.

Real ones. You simply stare at them.

Òur stop, Mummy!' squeaks Charlie, pulling at your arm. He's right. You

gather him and your bags up and clatter down the stairs as fast as you can. The **rain** is really hammering down as you duck into the station. You fish around for **your** tickets, still clutching the flowers. The real flowers.

It just isn't possible. It still isn't possible when you get home.

The windows fogged up as the rain grew worse. The Doctor wiped away a spyhole **with** the end of his scarf. The rain falling thick outside still shrouded the view.

They were sat outside Oval Tube station, the road still clogged with cars.

The teenager next to him turned up his music to compete with the storm. He

had paid no heed to the magic show. His loss. The Doctor checked his

watch

again. He had to keep busy, or he would go mad.

Ùgly It Up?' he said.

The boy pulled out an ear-chip. It grunted bassline in his fingers. Ùh?' he said.

The Doctor nodded at the headphone. 'Ugly It Up,' he said. 'That's the band.'

`Yeah,' said the boy, almost impressed. 'Got a problem with 'em?'

Ì once played washboard for Jabba Jones,' said the Doctor. 'And spoons.'

Tull!' said the boy, shaking his head. Of course, the Doctor hadn't done it yet.

Jones still had to fall in love with jazz. 'Want me to turn it down, that it?'

`Not at all,' said the Doctor. 'like I say, I'm a fan.'

The boy snorted, and put his ear-chip back in. Then he turned the volume down

anyway. He kept glancing at the Doctor, watching for any sign of smugness. The

Doctor gazed serenely through his spyhole.

The art deco curve of Oval station shone electric blue through the rain. People

thronged in the street. They were in T-shirts and shorts, soaked to the skin. The

Doctor wondered if there had been an accident. It was too soon, surely, for the

Underground to have flooded.

Then he saw the answer, the high back of the cricket ground. Of course, play

had been suspended. The crowd washed up against the bus, and the driver took

pity. Sopping people clambered up to the top deck. They muttered at their

misfortune, argued about the game. Passengers grudgingly made room for them,

three to seats that barely took two. The bus filled right up, people on the stairs and in the gangways.

The Doctor checked his watch. Ten to five. He wouldn't make it

Tyler kept his gaze fixedly out of the window, ignoring the odd man beside him. In

his ears, Jabba Jones called for rioting in the streets. It had been Tyler's favourite track for weeks, but now he felt self-conscious. Tyler liked Ugly It Up 'cos they

were angry, and the fury in their sound was wild, exciting. But sat with the odd

man, it seemed... well, a bit immature. Like a kid having a tantrum. He never

thought of it that way before. He took his ear-chips out and stuffed them into a

pocket.

The bus curled slowly round the perimeter of the cricket ground. A blue plaque

on a building to his left proclaimed itself the birthplace of Montgomery, whoever

he was. The road straightened out in front of them again, leading down to

Vauxhall and the cream-and-green building where James Bond worked. The

passengers behind him fell silent. Tall behind the rooftops in front of

them stood

Millbank Tower, an ugly, concrete-and-glass stack of offices or something. Black

clouds spiralled from its top floor, the epicentre of the storm. Pink lightning arced from the cloud. People behind Tyler gasped and gaped, some even cried. Tyler

shivered. It didn't seem real, like something out of a movie.

Ìt's going to be all right,' the odd man said. He spoke quietly, but with such

confidence and finality that Tyler believed him. The people on the bus must have

heard him, too. There was a great sigh of relief, people letting their breath out all together.

`But what is it?' asked a woman some rows back. Tyler and the odd man both

swivelled in their seats to look at her. The bus was packed fell of people, many of them wet through, all of them terrified.

Ìt won't hurt you,' the odd man told them. 'I won't let it.' For a moment they

were with him. There was a sudden, deafening crash of thunder. People screamed.

`You need something to raise your spirits,' said the man. 'How about a sing-

song?' Before anyone could laugh, he began *The* Wheels On The Bus. Tyler hadn't heard that for years, but everyone knew the words. He found himself laughing.

Despite themselves, the passengers joined in.

They made good progress towards Vauxhall. The Doctor let the passengers take

the song for themselves. The Jabba Jones fan next to him had a strong singing

voice. Soon the bus's occupants were singing something equally heartening, if a

little more adult in content. The chorus, defiant and plosive, made the Doctor

blush.

The cricket fans took over the bawdy songs. Someone said it was like the Blitz.

The Doctor explained to anyone who'd listen that crime rates had actually gone up

during the war. People joined in, arguing, agreeing, making jokes, making

friends. The boy with the ear-chips struck up conversation with a pretty girl,

distracting her from the storm with cheeky banter.

They reached the roundabout at Vauxhall and should have passed straight

through the centre on the bus lane. However, they were diverted by a police

cordon, and had to take the long way round. Traffic stalled around them. The bus

pulled into a stop, behind smart, expensive apartments that looked out on the

river. They were so nearly there.

The lights upstairs flickered off-on, off-on. The singing became a pantomime

boo. The newly made friends jostled from their seats and tramped down the stairs,

letting each other go first, laughing, swapping names and numbers. Outside, the

storm crashed and howled worse than ever. The passengers spilled out into it.

`We're gonna find a pub or something,' the teenager told the Doctor. He was

holding the girl's hand. 'Buy you a drink?'

Ì'm booked elsewhere,' said the Doctor. 'But it was nice to meet you.'

Ìt's stopping here,' said the boy when the Doctor made no sign of moving.

`That's why everyone's getting off.'

'I have to get across the river.'

`You'll need another bus.'

They bustled out into the rain, now clattering down like ball bearings. The new

couple hurried off down the street, still hand-in-hand. People ran for cover under

awnings, or into the lobbies of offices who'd opened up their doors. They cowered

under the arches of the bus station, or peeped from inside the railway arches. The

Doctor put up his umbrella. It fought against him, bobbing and batting this way

and that as the gale caught it. He had to hold on with both hands.

A huge whirlpool gouged a hole in the Thames just in front of Millbank Tower.

The river had become a monster. In thirty-odd years of policing, Dale Wingsworth **had** never seen anything like it. It had tugged away the central legs of Vauxhall Bridge, the road strip now fluttering under the onslaught. It wouldn't last long.

The noise was horrendous.

Above him, the windows of the apartment buildings exploded out into

the air.

The buildings were steadfast, resolute against the storm. Still, Dale's heart went

out to the poor souls stuck up there. It must be terrifying. Lights inside sparked

and went out. He looked away, back to his post. On the main road, streetlights bent in the wind like palm trees. The roads were awash with water, sloshing up

over his shoes.

Dale tried the radio in his car again. Nothing, just static. The storm must have

taken down all the aerials. A london without mobile phones, he thought. It was

practically medieval.

Outside, a man approached, bent double under his umbrella. Dale couldn't

believe it at first. Even the men with guns guarding MI6 had gone indoors. He

wound down the window of his door. The rain slapped him hard in the face.

`You'll be the Doctor?' he yelled.

The man stopped short, amazed. He hurried over. 'You've been expecting me?'

`Colonel Chaudhry said to keep an eye out for you.'

Ì have to get across the river.'

`The bridge is going to go any minute.'

Ì'd better get on with it, then.'

He stood before the rippling, twisting bridge. The Thames had come

alive,

clawing up at the structure. People watched him from the far end, behind and

inside more police vehicles. He probably had a crowd behind him too. He'd better

make this look good. He put the umbrella down, his muscles straining. He held it

out, feeling its weight. He would use it as a prop, for balance. Buster Keaton had

done something similar. Of course, that might have been a camera trick.

The wind grabbed his hat and hurled it off down towards City Hall.

The Doctor took one last, deep breath and sprinted forward across the bridge.

He nearly lost his footing as the bridge buckled up underneath him. He leant

forward, keeping his profile low to the wind. He heard the crack of the tarmac

behind him, didn't look back.

He surged ahead. The road suddenly fell away from under him. He tumbled

down...

... and found himself hurtling through the air as the road surface snapped back,

whiplashing up like a snake as it came free. He tipped forward, peddling with his

legs, thinking like a cricket ball, and smacked down onto the slick rooftop of a

police car. He rolled as he hit, sliding down the windshield, crashing into the

bonnet. It buckled under his weight, breaking his fall. He splashed into the foot

of water on the ground and came to a stop.

A drenched policeman helped him to his feet. The Doctor steadied himself.

Vauxhall Bridge was gone, the unshackled roadway now heading downstream.

Exhausted, the Doctor couldn't speak. He waved the policeman away and

started running off down Millbank.

He cut across the road as he passed Tate Britain. Built on the foundations of the

old penitentiary, he thought. The gallery and the jail, both out for the same ends.

To improve people, to better the world. He ran on, nearly there now. It had been

so long since he had been this way. That time at the prison? Or in the palace on the far side of the river?

He couldn't bear it being taken by the storm. All that history, swept clean away.

He wouldn't allow it.

Adam wouldn't be allowed to watch the rain. He sat loyally at his desk, waiting for the phone to ring. Across the courtyard, people sheltered in the restaurant and

coffee shop, watching the downpour. Global warming, he thought. He

remembered the delegation here earlier in the day. They'd told him about the

weather going mad. He'd been polite, of course, but he hadn't believed them. It

couldn't be as bad as they made out. That was what he'd thought. But this...

A man, bent low in the rain, fell through the main door. He stood there, gasping

for breath, a small lake forming on the floor around him.

`Raining?' said Adam, grinning and getting up from his seat. 'You'd think it was

centred on this place!'

He made his way over to the coffee pot, warming by the wall. He wasn't really

supposed to do this, but the poor bloke was wet through. Share the wealth, that's

what his mum used to say. And all he could offer was a hot drink. 'You'll want

some of this...' he was saying as he heard the lift ding open behind him He

turned, just in time to see the soaked man nip through the doors.

`Hey!' yelled Adam The lift doors closed just before Adam reached them. Still

holding the coffee pot, he hurried back to his desk. One of the switches

could disable the lift. He reached for it. The key was missing. The man must have

swiped it.

Adam pressed the police hot-line button.

Bernice stared into the black hole, into the barrel of Endwell's gun. Her handbag

hung heavy on her arm She thought for a second about putting on some lipstick,

amazed how calm she felt about it. At her feet, Ross clutched his arms around his

leg. The bullet had gone in just above his knee. She hoped she would be spared

that pain. The blood soaked into the sleeves of his dinner jacket. His suit would be ruined.

Endwell's men, the terrorists, made no move to help. The shooting had taken

them all by surprise, she noted, though not one of them would dare challenge

Endwell. Only he had the gun, the others were just lab technicians, geeks he'd co-

opted with the promise of a better world.

She glanced back up at Endwell. Just get it over, she thought. The gun wavered

in his hand. He must have had some basic training for this, knew to squeeze back **on** the trigger slowly, so as not to spoil the aim. Outside, wreckage clattered past **the** window even though they were on the top floor.

She had failed. That was what pained her the most: she'd failed the Doctor.

Ding!

She flinched at the sound of the lift arriving behind her. Damn

`Hello, Benny,' she heard the Doctor say. She didn't look round.

Àbout time,' she said. She hoped it sounded tough and sarcastic. She felt ready

to cry.

The look on Endwell's face was priceless. This really wasn't his day. The gun

pointed first at her, then at Ross down on the ground, then over to her left. That

would be where the Doctor was standing, then. Still, there was too much distance

between them to go for the gun. Not without someone getting hurt.

Ì had terrible trouble getting here,' said the Doctor. 'Emmett sends his love

though.'

The name-drop decided things. Endwell jabbed the gun towards the Doctor.

Èmmett is a lunatic!' he said, his tone hardly inspiring confidence in his own

mental state. For just a second he was distracted. Bernice threw her handbag at

him.

It should have cracked him nicely in the head, but he turned just too

soon and

the bag sailed over his shoulder. The gun was on her. He squeezed hard on the

trigger. The handbag smacked against the window behind him. The windows

absorbed the shock, bulging slightly outwards, just for a second. Then the storm

took them. Glass fragments punched out into the rain and away left. Papers,

chairs, anything not bolted down, swept out into the cacophony of the storm.

Endwell fired the gun, falling backwards as the shot went high. He stumbled,

trying to keep balance. The storm got him, picked him off the floor. He didn't even have time to scream as he vanished into the darkness.

Bernice grabbed for Ross, and Ross clung fast to the bolted-down furniture. All

around them was mayhem. The storm, deafening them, wrenched off Bernice's

shoes. They'd been pretty and cost all the money she'd had, but were murder on

her feet.

The Doctor sailed across the room, arms and legs windmilling as he tried to find

purchase. He passed over Bernice's head as she clung to Ross. A few other men

held on to whatever they could, their limbs streaking out behind them toward the

torn-open window. The window!

She watched, stricken. The Doctor's hands just caught the frame, bordered with

newly broken glass. Blood streaked from the Doctor's palms as he held on. His

scream was swallowed up by the gale.

`Cut it off!' Bernice called out to the man clinging to the machine.

He tried to work the controls. A lever came off in his hand. He had just a

moment to look at it, dumbfounded. Then he was swept out and away.

Bernice clambered up Ross's arm. Her hair and earrings whipped against her

face, yanking at her flesh. She made her way up to the desk, her legs streaming out behind her. This would be tricky.

She leapt off the side of the desk, hurling herself full force towards the door.

The air current snatched her as soon as she let go, propelling her to the window.

The machine was in the way. She grabbed at it, almost yanking her arms out. Her

clothes strained at her.

The controls would not respond. She thumped them. Nothing. Bashing harder

dislodged the covering panel. Thick bunches of cables appeared. She wriggled the

housing, exposing more wire. Suddenly the housing snapped off, and the shock

almost made her lose her grip.

She stared at the differently coloured wires. Where did she start? The red wires,

connected to the...

Bernice had seen enough thrillers to know explosive when she saw it.

`Blue wire!' the Doctor wailed, his fingers slipping. 'Cut the blue wire!' The

contents of his pockets were clattering out into the air.

Bernice tore at the machine's innards The blue wire came away in her hand.

There was a sudden, terrible silence.

With one last great splap!, the rain stopped.

The Doctor heaved himself over the window frame. He crashed forward into the

room, tumbling over himself like a clown. He cradled his messy hands. The men

on the floor got slowly to their feet.

`Nothing to it,' said Bernice, hitching her dress up. 'Where'd you get to?'

`Rush hour,' rasped the Doctor. 'You look nice.'

`Had to go to a dinner,' she said, dusting herself down. 'Ross thought we should

look the part.'

`Hello, Ross,' said the Doctor. 'Benny, cut the green wire, too.'

Bernice reached into the machine and tugged the green wire free. It fizzed as it

broke.

`Done.'

The Doctor struggled painfully to his feet. 'We've got about a minute,' he said.

The explosion hurried after them down the stairs. Two of the had-been

terrorists

carried Ross between them. Bernice followed close behind, her arms around the

Doctor. He had tears in his eyes. His hands were terrible to see.

Ì like the dress,' he said, his voice barely a whisper.

`You said to get noticed.' She nodded at Ross in front of her. 'He noticed me.'

`You pooled what you knew...'

Ànd followed Endwell when he left. Piece of cake.'

`You did good, Benny. I'm sorry if you've been up all night.'

`Hey,' she said, taking his arm carefully, 'all part of the job.'

They left Ross with the security guard at reception, already on the phone to the

police. The Doctor and Ross knew each other, of course. Ross Brimmicombe-

Wood was with UNIT. And he was spoken for. Dammit.

She and the Doctor made their way outside, into the carnage and sunshine.

`You found him, then?' said Bernice, binding the Doctor's hands with his tie. He

wouldn't wait for the ambulance.

`Yes,' said the Doctor.

Ànd was he a nutcase?'

`That's not the term we use now is it, Benny? He's certainly a troubled

individual. He didn't want any of this, though. His machine scared him. That's

why he told me how to stop it. He called them insane.' He gazed at the men around

them, the men who had beaten her and Ross, who had nearly destroyed the city.

They looked lost, now.

`They wanted to make things better,' Bernice said. Tor people to see what

they're doing to the planet. Endwell was an expert on climate change, and no one

was listening.'

`Drastic solutions,' said the Doctor. He seemed about to say something more.

But the men had his attention.

They were picking up the litter strewn everywhere across the road. It seemed so

pointless, there being so much of it. She couldn't see corpses, though, and had a

grisly thought of dead militants dropped all down Whitehall and the

Embankment. She watched the men work, supposing it meant they were doing

something, keeping busy, making some kind of amends. A thought struck her.

Ìt's this, isn't it? The little acts of kindness. That's what really makes things

better.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'Who knows what difference we make in the end,' he

said, turning to her. 'But, Benny, it's not always the end that's important.'

`No,' she said. She and the Doctor headed off to find the TARDIS. Behind them,

the bloody-nosed terrorists worked to clear the street

17.15

The Last Broadcast

Matthew Griffiths

Ì'm just nipping down the pub. Back in time for tea.'

Òkay, love.'

Geoff Sinton took his keys and wallet from the dresser. He looked out of the

window, up the hill towards Crystal Palace. It had stopped raining, and the sun

was out. The wet roof tiles gleamed, and the gutters were still sluicing with rain.

He smiled and removed his coat. Typical September weather: torrential downpour

one minute, blue skies the next.

He headed downstairs into the lounge. Stuart was lingering by the window, a

book in his hand, while Richard was kneeling by the games console, loading up a

cartridge.

Geoff winced. He'd promised the lad a match at some point, but couldn't face

the thrashing. Space invaders was about his limit.

`See you later, kids.'

`Bye, Dad.'

`Bye.'

The doorbell rang. Geoff frowned. He wasn't expecting anyone. He usually met

Rog and Ken up at the pub. He opened the door.

Two strangers were standing there. One was wearing a naval officer's uniform,

the other had his back to Geoff and was vigorously shaking out an umbrella.

Èr —' the sailor began.

`Hello!' The other man spun round, beaming, his brown curly hair throwing off

drops of rain like a dog's. 'May we come in?'

'Sorry?'

`That's most kind, most kind,' the man replied. He swiftly folded the umbrella

and leant past Geoff, hanging it on a coat hook. 'This is lieutenant Sullivan.' He gestured to the sailor, and, as he did so, swept past Geoff into the hallway.

`Hang on a minute —' spluttered Geoff. He suddenly realised the man was

wearing an enormous scarf, and it was trailing water into the house. 'Mind my

carpet!'

Ì'm sorry about the Doctor,' said Sullivan. 'We're... er... we're from the

television company.'

`You what?' Geoff watched as the other stranger knelt by the telly.

`Hello! What have we here?' the man asked Richard.

Ìt's mine,' Richard said. 'Who are you?'

Stuart had put his book down. 'Is he one of your friends, Dad?'

`No, I'm the Doctor and I'm here to borrow your television.' The

stranger smiled again and began to disconnect the console.

The sailor coughed. 'As I said, we've come from the television company. We're

here to install a *new*... a new, er, box on your set.'

`But we've already got satellite,' said Geoff.

`Yes.' The other stranger was rummaging round behind the telly now, and his

deep voice was somewhat muffled. 'We're here about your satellite.'

`The whole jolly transmitter in fact,' the sailor added.

Richard pulled his console out of the Doctor's way. The Doctor looked round the

room, then back at Richard, and pointed to one of the cables attached to the

console. 'I'll take that, thank you.'

Geoff watch dumbfounded as the man snatched the cable from Richard. `What

are you playing at?'

The Doctor glanced at the cartridge Richard was holding. `Well it's not Virtua

Soccer 12,' the Doctor replied, and disappeared behind the telly again.

`Dad! Stop him!'

Geoff made to cross the room, but the sailor stood in his way. Ì'm sorry, sir. The

Doctor won't be long. He only needs a few minutes.'

Ì want to know what you're doing, barging in here and mucking about with my

TV!' There was a bang. A puff of smoke drifted up from behind the set.

Stuart peered round the back of the screen at the Doctor. The wild-haired man

sat bolt upright, and the boy fell back into a chair.

`Nearly done!' the Doctor called cheerfully.

`***What*** have you nearly done?' Geoff asked.

The Doctor pulled a reel of wire from his pocket and cut off two lengths, then

began to tie these to the aerial that sat on top of the set, so they stuck up like a pair of horns. 'Not every home has one of these.' He paused. 'Well, not yet.'

Ì thought you said you were fitting a new box?' Geoff said to the sailor.

Àh, well, that's what the Doctor told me. He's the technical expert.'

Ì should hope so,' said Geoff. He pointed at the telly. 'This thing didn't come

cheap, you know.'

`Hardly the top of the range,' the Doctor said, tut I think it's the best I'll be able to find. In the next, ooh —' he looked at his watch `— twenty minutes or so.'

`You come in here without my say-so, take away my son's console, blow up my

telly then start casting aspersions, and you —'

`You're not shouting at the television again, are you?' linda's voice came

through from the kitchen. 'I thought you'd gone out.'

The Doctor was continuing to work. He took a small object from his pocket,

then pointed at Stuart. 'May I use your phone?' Silently, the boy took it from the

table beside him and handed it to the Doctor 'Thank you,' the Doctor

said,

yanking the cable from its socket. He clipped the object — some kind of electronic

component, thought Geoff— onto the end of the phone cable.

Ànd what's all this now?' Geoff protested.

`Hurry up, Doctor,' said Sullivan. 'We don't know how long Sarah's got.' He

nodded at Geoff. 'And we don't want to try Mr — er — this gentleman's patience.'

The Doctor frowned, then reached over to the table beside Stuart, and snatched

up the phone bill that had been sitting there. He glanced at it briefly before

looking Geoff in the eye. 'I'm sure Mr Sinton will appreciate our efforts, Harry,' he said. 'It's not just Sarah who's in danger.'

Ìs that supposed to be a threat?' Geoff asked. Richard backed away.

`Don't worry,' said Harry. 'He means the whole Earth is in danger.' Geoff stared

at him.

The Doctor knelt by the telly and opened the flap below the screen. Finding a

spare socket, he connected the phone. 'You know, it's a good thing the Verulans

waited till you'd all gone digital,' he said over his shoulder. Ìf they'd done this in your time, Harry, they'd never have got a decent signal'

`Does this nutter have a clue what he's talking about?' asked Geoff.

Òf course he does.' Harry bristled. 'Er, Doctor, what are you talking about?'

`There,' said the Doctor. 'And I'm not a "nutter": He switched the telly on.

Nothing happened. 'Oh, dear.'

`You haven't plugged it in,' said Richard.

"Ah,' said the Doctor. He did so. 'Would you like to be my assistant?'

The telly buzzed into life. Geoff heard his mobile ringing in the kitchen and

hesitated, but then decided to ignore it. He wanted to know what these two were

up to.

`What was that noise?' asked Harry.

`Just my phone,' said Geoff. Harry looked from the kitchen to the phone the

Doctor was holding, and seemed about to say something but then the Grandstand

theme tune came on. The programme was just finishing.

Actually, the screen was very stormy, thought Geoff. The transmitter was at the

top of the road and they still couldn't get a decent picture.

The phone in his hand, the Doctor threw himself onto the sofa, his arms, legs

and scarf sprawling. Then he waved his hand at Harry. The sailor frowned, patted

his pockets, then produced a small piece of paper. Geoff looked over his shoulder;

he read the namèKathnor', followed by a telephone number.

The Doctor glanced at the number, then picked up the receiver and dialled. It

rang through the telly's speaker, and the screen flickered in time.

There was a

click, and a new image emerged from the static. It was of a small, dimly lit room,

with people moving in the background. Geoff couldn't make out any more, as

there seemed to be someone standing in the way.

`This isn't a new game, is it?' Richard whispered.

Ànything but,' said Harry.

The figure on the screen turned to face the viewers. Crikey, thought Geoff. The

face had warty, leathery green skin, with two small tusks that protruded upwards

from its lower jaw. Richard scuttled across the carpet and grabbed his brother's

legs in fright.

Àh,' said the face. 'Doctor.'

`Good afternoon,' said the Doctor, solemnly.

Ìs this the last, futile gesture that you so rashly promised?'

Geoffwasn't sure how the face was speaking — its jaw moved awkwardly up and

down, barely in time with the words. 'What is it?' he asked.

Ìsn't it a repeat?' said Stuart.

Harry ignored this. 'It's the Verulan leader.' After a moment, he added, 'Marshal

Kathnor.' Geoff nodded, then shook his head.

`Yes, sorry it took so long,' the Doctor was saying. 'I would *have* been quicker if you hadn't blown up the signal generator.'

The face on the screen — the creature — rasped with what sounded like glee. 'A

necessary precaution. Once our equipment was in place, we could not have anyone tampering with the transmitter.'

`Geoff, love, you still here? Only you — oh, hello.' Linda emerged from the

kitchen. 'I didn't know you had friends round.'

Geoff looked from the Doctor to Harry. The latter stepped briskly over to Linda.

Ì say.' She smiled and patted her hair.

`How d'you do, Mrs Sinton? I'm lieutenant Sullivan and we're from the

television station.'

Geoff stared at Linda. 'Here, did you arrange this?'

`pardon?'

`Did this chap come round in the week and sell you some satellite deal?'

Not at all,' said the sailor. 'We've, er, chosen you for our promotion. Isn't that

right, Doctor?'

Òoh, what's that?' linda said, smiling.

Àn interactive science-fiction channel,' the Doctor snapped. Now would you

mind? I'm on the telephone.'

linda perched on the arm of the sofa. 'So what is it, then?' she asked, pointing

at the screen.

Ìt's a repeat,' said Stuart again.

`Typical,' said linda. 'They bring out a new channel and just show the

same old

stuff.'

`Kathnor —' Geoff couldn't tell from the Doctor's voice whether he was quite

serious or not `— I am obliged to tell you that you ought to call this whole plan off now, while you still have the chance.'

`That reminds me,' said linda. She pulled Geoff's mobile from her pocket 'Log

called just now to say where were you, then the signal cut out'

`What on Earth is that?' asked Harry, pointing at the phone.

Ìt's my phone,' Geoff said. Harry pointed at the Doctor, then shook his head.

Ànd what obliges you?' the creature on the screen said. 'Your paltry code of

interference?' At this point, the room behind Kathnor dimmed even further, and

the TV screen fizzed with static.

Ìnterference?' echoed Harry

Ènergy drain reported, Marshal,' said a voice from out of shot.

Geoff tapped the Doctor on the shoulder, pointing at the dimly lit room on the

screen. 'Did you do that?'

The Doctor shrugged, cupping his hand over the receiver. 'Nothing to do with

me.' Then he removed his hand. 'Just a small demonstration of my powers,

Kathnor.'

The picture resolved itself. 'You are playing for time, Doctor. Our own signal

generator will be ready in moments.'

`There are easier ways to get on TV, you know,' the Doctor grinned. 'Opportunity

Knocks, *New Faces...'*

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Geoff tutted. Not more repeats.'

'Enough!' the creature cried. He leaned in towards the camera, and, with a snap,

the picture dissolved. The Doctor grimaced and hung up.

'What now?' asked Harry.

'Who was that?' asked linda.

'What's it going to do?!' Richard wailed.

'All right, all right!' the Doctor snapped. He looked at Linda. 'That was Marshal

Kathnor of the Fifth Verulan Signals Battalion ' He turned to Richard. 'He's going

to broadcast a signal that will immobilise everyone within this transmitter area,

leaving the way open for a Verulan invasion.' He stared at Harry. 'And we're going

to stop him ' He snatched up the phone again and stabbed at the keys.

'This channel isn't so bad, is it?' Geoff smiled at Harry. 'How do you subscribe?

'Subscribe?' repeated Harry.

'Sign up?' Geoff asked. 'Is it a monthly thing, or pay-per-view?' Harry continued

to look at him blankly. 'You're not from the satellite at all, are you?'

'Er, no,' said Harry. 'Very much here on Earth.'

The telly's speaker rang again. There was a click, and a new face appeared, quite

close to the camera at the other end. It was a girl. A pretty girl, too, thought Geoff.

'Sarah!' The Doctor grinned.

'Hello, Doctor,' the girl said. She seemed to be speaking into a small **handset**

that was a camera as well.

'Where are you?'

'In the ducting. It got rather hot in here when we took off, you know.'

'Yes... Sorry we couldn't make it. Harry and I were a little tied up.' The Doctor peered at the screen, looking at what was behind Sarah. 'I think that's one of the signal boosters. It's all very well me bouncing the signal back, but it has to be on maximum strength. The Verulans had some power problems just now —'

'Hadn't paid their bill?' The girl smiled a cheeky smile. Geoff found himself

grinning too, until Linda caught his eye.

'Something like that,' said the Doctor. 'If you connect the wires there, you

should give them quite a jolt.'

'How on Earth can she do that?' asked Harry.

'No need to worry, Harry,' said Sarah. She looked off screen for a moment.

There was a rattling sound, and then she held a slim silver object up to the camera.

'Ta-dah!'

'Good girl!'

Stuart looked at Harry. 'Is she your girlfriend?' Harry flushed.

'I wondered where that had got to,' the Doctor was saying. Now if you **can**

attach it to the main junction there — yes.'

Sarah crawled a little way up the ducting and pressed the end of the object

against a clump of wires. There was a high-pitched whining noise, and Richard

grabbed Stuart's hands, putting them over his ears. The screen dissolved into

static for a moment, then the picture cleared. Sarah had attached the clump of

wires to a larger junction box.

'Done it,' she said, looking down as she put the silver device away. 'Now I —'

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A green scaly claw came into vision on the left of the screen. It flailed around for a moment, then clamped itself across her mouth. Another claw reached down and

grabbed her hand.

`Sarah!' yelled the Doctor.

Wide-eyed, her screams muffled, the girl was dragged from view. The camera

clattered and came to rest, displaying the shift of shadows in the duct, which soon became black. The TV went quiet.

`Sarah! Sarah Jane!'

`What are you going to do?' asked Geoff.

`Where did she go, Mummy?' asked Richard.

`Well, I think that's plain irresponsible, letting a girl get into a situation like that,' said linda. She glared at the Doctor. 'Whatever were you thinking?'

The Doctor slowly put the receiver down, then lifted it again. 'There's only one

thing for it.' He clicked his fingers at Harry, and the sailor handed him the slip of paper with the alien's number. The Doctor dialled.

A phone call to an alien? thought Geoff. Was that really what the Doctor was

doing? He briefly wondered what the call charges would be like, but then

shrugged and sat on the arm of Stuart's chair.

Kathnor had appeared on the TV again. His control room seemed somewhat

brighter now.

`What have you done with Sarah?' the Doctor intoned.

Àh,' Kathnor gurgled. The human female. She is safe — for now!'

The Doctor glowered. 'Where is she?'

Kathnor stepped away from the camera and gestured behind him. Geoff could

see one of the other creatures, its face set in a grim mask, restraining Sarah in an arm-lock. Poor girl.

`Human female? Honestly, I've never heard anything so demeaning,' said linda.

The Doctor continued to look intently at the telly. Geoff followed his gaze. There

were some panels at the back of the spaceship with indecipherable symbols on

them.

`What is it, Doctor?' Harry whispered.

`How's your Verulan, Harry?'

`My...? Oh, pretty ropy, I'm afraid. Why?'

`What's he talking about, Mum?'

Òh, just an idea,' said the Doctor.

`Doctor? Doctor!' Kathnor was leaning in above the camera again, his words

flecking the lens with drool.

`Yes?' the Doctor snapped back.

`The female will come to no harm, provided you vacate this channel

immediately.'

Àh, well, it's a little late for that now.'

Kathnor drooled. 'We shall see. Activate the signal — maximum power!' he

bellowed.

`What does he mean?' Geoff asked.

The Doctor cupped his hand over the receiver again. 'He means humanity is

doomed,' he replied sombrely. Then he broke into a grin. 'At least, that's what he

thinks.'

`So we're all right?'

`Yes.'

Ànd I can go to the pub after?'

`Yes.'

`Good.'

Ìndeed.' The Doctor frowned. 'It must be terribly inconvenient for you, aliens

always invading on Saturdays. Why do they do that, do you think?' He

lifted his

hand and spoke breezily into the phone. 'Sorry about that, Kathnor. A small

domestic matter. Now, what did you say?'

`You are too late, Doctor!'

`Yes, that was it. Well, Kathnor, I did try to warn you.'

Ìs that some kind of threat?'

`Doesn't sound like much of a threat to me, stupid alien,' said Richard.

Ì just hope you've got an *escape route.'*

The Doctor seemed to give unnecessary emphasis to the last two words, thought

Geoff. What was he playing at?

Kathnor turned awkwardly and looked behind him, at one of the panels the

Doctor has been staring at earlier.

`Just as I thought,' the Doctor murmured.

A voice crackled from out of shot. 'The signal has reached the Earthlings'

transmitter, Marshal.'

Everyone in the lounge leaned towards the television.

`The signal has been... reflected!' the voice spluttered.

What?!' Kathnor cried. 'How...?'

Ìt will intercept this vessel in zero point seven Earth minutes.'

Òh, dear.' The Doctor smiled. 'It looks like this will be your last broadcast after all.'

Kathnor moved from view. Verulans milled around in the background.

`You've blown him up?' asked Geoff.

linda practically leapt to her feet. 'What about that poor girl?'

`Yes, Doctor,' Harry added nervously. 'Sarah , '

Àh.' The Doctor cleared his throat. 'Sarah?' He shouted into the phone. On the

screen, Sarah was struggling with her captor. She broke free of the creature, but it lunged after her — then fell over as the floor started to shake. Sarah got her balance then looked up at the camera.

`Doctor?'

`Sarah, listen to me. That hatch behind you, on your left — it's an escape pod!'

`How did hem?' said linda.

`He tricked the alien, Mum,' said Stuart. 'Good one, Doctor!'

Geoff could see the alien leader shuffling after the girl. Then the image lurched

and went dead.

`Sarah.'

`Sarah!'

`Sarah...?'

`She's dead, Mummy!' said Richard, taking linda's hand.

The Doctor dived from the sofa into the tangle of wires in front of the telly. He

plugged something into the games console, then fiddled with the keypad. A *new*

image appeared.

Òuter space,' breathed Richard.

`Not quite,' said the Doctor. 'Earth orbit.' Sure enough, the Earth glowed into

life in the bottom corner of the screen, and above it, a satellite. Attached to the satellite was a blocky sort of spaceship. For a moment, something bulged from the

side of it, then tumbled out into the atmosphere.

`She's away,' said Harry,

`Someone's away,' the Doctor said. They looked at each other for a moment.

The family were glued to the screen: a bolt of blue light shot up through the

atmosphere, a black dot flickering beneath it on the Earth's surface momentarily.

Then the bolt hit the spaceship. Flame ruptured the hull, and seconds later, it

exploded. As one, Geoff and his family breathed out.

`Hang on a minute,' Geoff frowned. 'Since when were TV signals blue bolts?'

The Doctor had resumed his place on the sofa, his hand hovering over the

telephone. 'Oh, it was just a simulation. For ease of viewing,' he said distractedly.

The phone rang. He snatched it up.

`Hullo?'

Geoff tensed.

`Sarah!' The Doctor beamed. 'Yes, yes indeed.' He listened. 'Yes. Ah-hah.' He

took up the TV's remote control and thumbed the buttons rapidly. A yellow line

curved across the screen, tracing a path from the spaceship down into the sea.

`Yes, I make it somewhere near the Canaries in about —' he checked

his watch

again ooh, two hours. See you there!' He hung up and got to his feet. Then he

paused. 'I hope she packed a swimming costume.'

There was a bleeping sound. Geoff looked at the telly, but it didn't seem to be

coming from there.

%limey — that's the oven!' said Linda. 'Better check on the tea.'

Richard was chasing Stuart round the lounge now, his hands outstretched,

clawlike, and he made a growling noise. From somewhere nearby, there was

another bleeping noise. Geoff looked around in bewilderment.

Harry pointed to Geoff's hand. 'It's — er — it's your phone.'

Àt least the networks are operating all right,' said the Doctor. He turned to

Harry. 'Come along.'

Èr, well, goodbye, Mr Sinton. Goodbye, all,' said Harry dazedly. He joined the

Doctor in the hall.

`Wait' called Geoff, his phone still ringing. 'What happens now?"

The Doctor took his umbrella from the wall and passed it to Harry. 'Stay tuned!'

he laughed. And then they were gone.

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1 7.40

The Terror of the Darkness

Joseph Lidster

Ìt's lovely now it's stopped raining!'

`What's that, dear?' Deirdre muted *The Generation Game* and hobbled through to her small, spotless kitchen. Her husband was standing on the doorstep with his

back towards her.

`look, love, it's actually sunny now! It was bucketing with rain half an hour

ago.' He laughed. 'You've got to love the British weather.'

Suppressing a smile, she moved to join him. She linked her arm with his and

looked up at his beaming face. Trevor's childlike joy at the magic of the natural

world was just one of the many things she still loved about him.

Ànd look! A rainbow!' He pointed up towards the sky. 'Make a wish!'

She looked up at a beautiful ribbon of sparkling colour streaming across the

darkening sky. 'I think we're a bit old to be making wishes!' She smiled before

turning and stepping back into the kitchen. 'I'd best get tea started. Macaroni

cheese tonight.'

`lovely. I'll just step out for a cig.'

What a day, thought Will Hoffman as he drove through yet another puddle. He

looked out at the wet houses, gleaming brightly in the *evening* sunlight. And it ain't ov-Tammitr he yelled, slamming on the brakes. As the car swerved to a halt, he

leaned out of the window and swore at the grinning pair who'd just stepped into

the road. 'You trying to get yourselves killed?'

The man with the ridiculous scarf quickly pulled his sailor friend back onto the

pavement as Hoffman released the brake and drove past them.

`Must be fancy-dress night, eh?' he asked, glancing in the mirror at his back-

seat passenger.

`What's that, lieutenant?' asked the colonel, without looking up from her

handset.

We nearly knock down two civilians and she doesn't even blink. Cold-hearted

cow. 'Forget it, sir,' he said. 'Don't mind me.'

Trevor ground the cigarette butt into the soil and turned away from his red and

blue petunias. His garden really was his pride and joy.

He started to walk back to the house when, pausing for breath, he noticed

something. Something dark. Something that made him shudder. Something

black invading his kingdom of red, blue and green. He took a tentative step

towards it.

* * *

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`... which can only intensify the already unstable political situation in Syria. And now, with the evening's traffic news, here's Trisha.'

'Thanks, Francis. The major disruption to tonight's traffic is, of course, the

collapse of Vauxhall Bridge. Much of the surrounding area's still cordoned off, so

drivers are being advised to find alternative routes. More travel news after the

weather. Well, Scott, it's been a bit of a day, hasn't it?'

Ìndeed it has, Trisha. Luckily, the rain does seem to have stopped and, in many

parts of London, the sun's come out to say hello. In fact, I think I'll be having a barbecue when I get home tonight. What about you, Francis?'

`Well, Scott, I —'

`For God's sake...' muttered Will, as he turned off the radio. 'Welcome to

london.' He glanced in the mirror and smiled. Blimey, she's actually looking up.

Not bad looking, really. lovely pair of eyes. I wonder if she's...

`lieutenant?'

Nice voice too. Bit posh maybe, but wouldn't say no. 'Sir?'

`lieutenant, perhaps you'd like to keep your eyes on the road. We wouldn't want

any more accidents, now would we?'

He forced himself to grin at her. 'It would be easier if I knew exactly where we

were going.'

Ìt's a Code Blue, lieutenant. Means you find out when we get there.' She smiled

a smile so sweet it'd make a diabetic convulse. 'Of course, if you'd actually read the UNIT handbook, you'd know what a Code Blue was. Left here, please.'

As the last dregs of the puddle leisurely evaporated away in the evening sun, a

battered blue box materialised to take their place. A pack of teenagers, sheltering in a nearby bus stop, their mouths open and their baseball caps deflecting the

bright sunlight, stared as a door opened and out stepped...

`How do you do? I'm the Doctor. Well, judging by your attire, I'll assume I've got

the date right. And...' He paused to look up at the white concrete and glass

building, sidestepping the blobs of rain that still dripped down from its roof.

Ànd, yes, it looks like I got the location right too. Lewisham police station! Evenin', guv'nor!'

Will drummed his fingers on the dashboard.

`Traffic's bad tonight' There was a pause. 'Colonel?'

The colonel sighed and looked up. 'What is it, lieutenant?'

I said the traffic's bad tonight.' He gestured his hand towards the tinted

windscreen, indicating the unmoving traffic that blocked their way.

`Well, I can see why you were transferred to UNIT. Nothing gets past you,

does it?'

Suddenly snapping, Will grabbed his pistol, turned and shot a bullet *through the lovely colonel's forehead. Her head exploded,* blood and bits *of* brain *splattering across the* back windscreen.

He turned awkwardly. 'Sir, can I ask you something?'

Again, she sighed. 'What is it now?'

`Do you have a problem with me?'

`Good question, Hoffman ' She put down the handset and looked him

directly

in the eye. 'Yes.'

Òkay.' Will shrugged and turned back to face the unmoving traffic. 'Just so long

as I know.'

And so they sat in silence.

Welcome to UNIT, Hoff.

The Doctor examined the group of youths. 'No? You haven't seen anything

untoward? Anything out of the ordinary?'

`Just you, mate,' one of them replied.

`No light, but rather darkness visible, served only to discover sights of woe,'

announced the Doctor gravely, his shadow darkening in the evening sunlight. He

looked up at the glorious orange sun setting in the violet sky and gave a wistful

sigh. Then he looked down at the grey road, packed with unmoving traffic and breathed in, gagging as the tang of petrol hit the back of his throat. He looked into **the** gormless face of the nearest boy with a sad smile. 'Paradise Lost, indeed.'

`Yeah, whatever.' The uncouth youth spat at the Doctor's feet and politely asked

him to move out of his personal space.

The traffic inched forward as Londoners made their way home. Will seethed

quietly as he looked down lewisham High Street. He wouldn't give her the

satisfaction of asking what the problem was. Instead, he concentrated on his

watch. A leaving present from the guys in York.

`Just to remind you, Colonel. I'm off duty at six.'

She was looking out of the window at something. 'Today was your first day with

UNIT, lieutenant. You were nearly an hour late.'

So that's what her problem was. 'I got lost on the Tube, I'm not used to it yet. I **did** explain that this morning, sir.'

She continued to look at whatever it was that had caught her eye. 'Yes, you did.

However, as an oh-so-dedicated member of His Majesty's armed forces, I'm sure

you won't mind making the time up tonight.'

It wasn't a request. Will turned and looked out of his window. At a bus stop, a

man in a bizarre, multicoloured jacket was being harassed by a bunch of kids.

`Reckon we should go and help him, sir?'

`That's not what I'm looking at.' She pointed out of her window. 'See that?'

Will looked at the strange blue box next to the police station wall. 'What is it?'

`That, lieutenant,' she said, opening the car door and jumping out, 'is Code

Blue.'

`Deirdre! Come and look at this! And bring my glasses.'

Trevor had picked up a stick and was poking it into the shadows at the bottom

of the fence. Something was there.

Ì'll be out in a minute. I'm just lighting the gas.'

His bones creaking, Trevor eased himself onto his knees. He peered into the

shadows and, again, poked at whatever it was that was there. An area of the

shadow seemed to be darker than the rest. He poked at it again and watched as the

blackness grew. Then, sensing that something really wasn't right, he decided that

it would be better to leave well alone. He was still easing himself to his feet when the black thing burst outwards and embraced him, pulling him silently into the

shadows.

Ùnhand me, this instant!'

The kid shoved the man in the multicoloured coat up against the wall. 'Give us

your wallet!' he snarled.

Ì'll do no such thing. You don't seem to understand! You're all in terrible

danger!'

`You threatening me?' asked the kid.

`He might not be,' announced a voice, tut I am!' The woman who'd appeared

out of nowhere grabbed the potential mugger by his arm and, effortlessly flinging

him to the ground, announced that nobody was to move. 'I'm Colonel Emily

Chaudhry of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce. Now let's all just play

nicely, yeah?'

`Pour contents into saucepan and heat gently,' read Deirdre, carefully. 'Do not

allow to boil.'

She put the tin back down. She knew it was silly but she always liked to check

the instructions. Just in case they changed them. It was one of her little quirks.

One that had always made Trevor chuckle. She was opening the can when she

heard her husband stepping back into the house. She turned to face him.

`Do you want a slice of bread with it?' she asked, before noticing that there was

something very, very wrong with Trevor.

His eyes were completely black.

Involuntarily, she leant back against the oven, feeling the sudden heat of the

flame against her back.

`The Darkness is here!' he hissed, taking a step towards her.

Èmily Chaudhry! Now, what on Earth brings you here?'

Holding the mugger in an arm-lock, Will stood back and watched as the man in

the technicolour nightmare of a coat grasped the colonel's hand and shook it. He

noticed that she recoiled slightly at the physical contact.

`Doctor?' She recovered her composure. 'You've changed again.'

Ìndeed I have. A vast improvement, I'm sure you'll agree.' The man's voice

boomed across the street, uncaring of public etiquette.

Èr... sorry to break up the reunion, sir, but what about this?' With his head, Will gestured at the squirming mugger. 'Do you want me to arrest him, Mr...?'

The man swung around to face them. 'It's just Doctor, actually. And, no, I think

he's learnt his lesson. Why don't you run off home, there's a good lad. Let him go, lieutenant.'

Ìf you say so.' Releasing the mugger, Will couldn't help but smile at the

Doctor's patronising attitude. Probably why he's mates with Colonel Coldheart.

Should have let him get mugged.

Ignoring the violent outburst of swearing that erupted from the lad's mouth as

he ran off, the Doctor swung back to Chaudhry.

`Well, Emily?'

`Fine, thank you, Doctor.'

The Doctor put his hands in his pockets and pulled a face. 'I meant, well, what

are you doing here?'

She smiled. 'A Code Blue. Your TARDIS.'

`Not the Verulans then?'

`The what now? Are they why you're here?'

Òh, no. I've already dealt with them. Many years ago. Well, many years ago for

me but only a few minutes ago for london. In fact, I'm probably still pottering

around here somewhere.'

Will was pleased to see Chaudhry's cool exterior cracking a little. Suddenly, the

Doctor crouched down and pulled some kind of computer handset out of his coat

pocket. He pointed it at the police station wall and listened. Will leaned over to the colonel. 'What's going on? Who is he?'

Chaudhry sighed. Ìf you'd read the handbook instead of spending the day

playing solitaire on your computer, you'd know. He's the Doctor. Used to be

UNIT's scientific adviser.'

Will shrugged. 'Yeah?'

`Yeah,' she mimicked. 'Oh, and Hoffman?'

`Yeah?'

`He's an alien who travels through time and space.'

At that point, Will wished he had read the UNIT handbook. Before he had time

to respond, the Doctor jumped to his feet and strode off towards a side road.

`Doctor? called Chaudhry.

Without stopping, the Doctor shouted back. 'I think I've found it. Do try to keep

up.'

Ì told you to make a wish. Why didn't you make a wish? Why do you always laugh

at me?' Trevor was shouting as he slammed the can of Tesco Value macaroni

cheese into Deirdre's face. 'Well, who's laughing now?' he screamed, as the blood

and cheap cheese sauce pooled over the floor of Deirdre's small, spotless kitchen.

And outside, the Darkness grew, shadows getting blacker as they spread into the

next garden...

`Come on, Hoffman. Keep up!' shouted the colonel.

Will swore under his breath as he ran to catch up with Chaudhry. They ran

around the corner onto Webster Road and Will stopped.

`Great,' he muttered. 'Suburbia.'

Trying to shield his eyes against the setting sun, he moved into the shadows

nearer the wall. That's better. Darker and cooler. He looked down the street of...

suburbia. He couldn't just see it. He could hear it. He could smell it. He could

smell barbecues. He could hear children playing. He could hear meaningless,

bland, mainstream pop music blaring out of someone's radio. God, he hated it.

Why couldn't they be dealing with something in the city? Something where the

people involved wouldn't be brain-dead losers sat in front of the telly. Brain-dead losers who don't deserve to live, let alone be helped. God help them anyway. Living their miserable lives. In fact, *he* could help them. Help them end their miserable lives. He could line them up and see how many he could shoot a bullet through.

Then, if he ran out of bullets, he could strangle the rest. Families and barbecues

and crap TV and...

`Hoffinan!À woman's voice, shouting, slicing into his thoughts.

His thoughts... his thoughts of murder and darkness and, yeah, how many he

could kill. He was a soldier. The smell of barbecues was overpowering and he

could see the dads in their striped aprons on their B&Q patios, laughing as they burnt the beefburgers.

Well, he'd show them. Imagine the kids' faces when lieutenant Will Hoffman

showed up and started barbecuing their daddies. Shoving their screaming faces

down onto the burning grills. Then he'd make the kids watch as he did the same

to their mummies and then —

Suddenly, there was an explosion of sunlight and Will collapsed into the road.

Dazed, he looked up into the silhouetted faces of Chaudhry and the Doctor.

`Well,' announced the Doctor. 'I think we're in the right place.'

`You can stay out there and sulk but it'll be dark soon!'

Shaun Ashdown collapsed onto the grass and watched as his mum stalked back

into the house, slamming the door behind her. Fine. He would stay out here and

sulk. That would show her. She said he wasn't allowed any dinner unless he tidied

his room. But he knew that wouldn't happen. He knew that he needed food to

breathe or something. He'd been taught that at school and he knew that Mum

wouldn't want him to die. That meant she'd have to give him dinner. He would just

sit here and sulk.

Ì don't want no dinner anyway!' he bawled at the house. There was no reply.

So he sat and he sulked. Just sitting there was boring though. He needed to do

something so that he could ignore his tummy rumbling. He looked around the

garden and saw his football wedged in the shadows at the bottom of the fence.

Will sat on the edge of the pavement and tried to comprehend what had happened.

Why had he thought — no, why had he felt like that? Sure, *he* wasn't *keen* on suburbia and all it suggested. Wife, kids, mortgage, et cetera. It was the reason

he'd joined the army. See the world and escape his overbearing family. But, he

didn't feel that strongly about it!

His hands shaking, he pulled out a cigarette, lit it and breathed in deeply,

inhaling a lungful of relaxing, comforting nicotine. After the Doctor had pulled

him out of the shadows, he'd been dumped on the pavement and told to breathe

deeply. He looked over at the colonel and the Doctor. They were crouched,

pointing the Doctor's device into the shadows. And they were talking. He strained

to hear what they were saying.

`He's just like the rest, Doctor. No one else would take him.'

`Why's that?'

`Because he's a terrible soldier. He's cocky and uncontrollable and... well, it's

yet another case of someone they can't be bothered to deal with, so let's just dump him off on UNIT.'

The Doctor stopped what he was doing and turned to Chaudhry. 'He doesn't

follow rules blindly then?'

`Well, no.' Chaudhry raised an eyebrow. 'But don't think I don't know what

you're getting at.'

'So, our lieutenant Hoffman is impulsive and reckless and probably likes a

drink or two? He's not afraid to show his superior officer a bit of cheek? Sounds to me like he's a man who knows how to live.' He leant in, closer to Chaudhry.

`Sounds to me likes he's the perfect UNIT soldier.'

For a second it looked like Chaudhry was going to argue. Then, shaking her

head, she smiled. 'Maybe you're right. They've packed him off with all us other

rejects.' She stood up, brushing the dust off her knees. 'But if you say he reminds you of me at his age, I will have to kill you.'

The Doctor held up his hands in mock surrender. 'Emily! As if I would.'

'lieutenant!'

It took Will a second to realise that Chaudhry was talking to him. He stubbed

out the cigarette and walked over to her. 'Sir?'

`The Doctor's apprised me of the situation and we've formulated a plan. We

need you to return to HQ and —'

Èr... sorry to interrupt, sir,' said Will, 'but can I ask what the situation is?'

As Chaudhry's mouth fell open, the Doctor jumped to his feet.

`See! An inquiring mind! Perfect UNIT material! Well, Will, let me explain.'

Ì'm just saying that I'm sick of always being the bad cop. You let Shaun get away

with murder and I'm the one who has to deal with id'

Bill Ashdown nodded his agreement as he angled his head back towards The

Generation Game. The conveyor belt of prizes was just about to start.

Àre you even listening to me?' shouted Anna.

`Yeah. I'll speak to him.' W... microwave... ear-chip... ***go*** on, lad, ***memorise them...***

`Where is he?'

Anna stormed back into the kitchen, shouting over her shoulder. 'He's in the

garden. Sulking.'

`Call him in, then.' Champagne glasses... ***Wife screaming*** from the kitchen... photo albums... CUDDLY TOY!

`Daddy.'

Bill turned around to *see* little Shaun stood in the kitchen doorway. little Shaun with his staring black eyes and dripping-red garden shears.

`Daddy. Mummy said I couldn't have any dinner Daddy, I want some dinner.'

* * *

209

Àbout half an hour ago, I destroyed the Fifth Verulan Signals Battalion. Or was it

the Sixth? Anyway, they were going to broadcast a signal that would have

immobilised everyone in the area.'

Will tried to remain cool and calm as the manic man in the mad coat told him

the crazy story. It's all a bit mental but it'll *soon be over. Then it's* off to the pub. *Maybe ask* the colonel to *come for* one. Pints, pop music, football.

`But there was something I missed. The Darkness!'

`Couldn't you see it?' asked Chaudhry.

The Doctor looked at her sternly. 'I'll ignore that The Darkness is... well, I

suppose you'd call it a parasite. It lives in space and then, every once in a while, it needs to land on a planet and feed. It usually does this by latching itself onto a

passing spaceship and hitching a ride. Unfortunately, this time it chose the

Verulans, who had themselves chosen Earth. When I destroyed the Verulan ship,

the Darkness was flung into the atmosphere and... well, see for yourselves!'

He indicated the shadows running down the nearest wall. Will crouched down.

`What am I supposed to be looking at?'

`Well, as its name suggests, the Darkness is... dark. It can only survive where

there's no light.'

`So, it's like a space vampire?' joked Will. 'I was attacked by a space vampire!'

`That's quite an apt description, Will. It lives in the shadows and it feeds on...

people.'

Will stopped smirking. 'people?'

The Doctor crouched down. 'It engulfs them. It reaches into their minds and

makes them... angry. It feeds on the darkness inside. It finds what it can and twists it out of all sense of proportion. It makes them... kill and then feeds on the anger and fear that that generates.' The Doctor stopped and pointed. 'Can you see it,

Will? It's there... the blackest part of the shadows waiting to grab hold of you and twist the darkest part of your soul.'

Will felt he should allow time for a dramatic pause before asking what they

should do next.

The Doctor looked up. 'Whatever we do, we need to do it fast. It's getting dark.

Once the sun sets, then that's it. The end of the world as we know it.'

Òh.'

Meanwhile, at 24 Webster Avenue, Mr Goodman was seriously starting to regret

telling his kids to turn off the light when they left a room...

`So, this vampire parasite thing can't survive where there's light?' said Chaudhry, as she looked up at the darkening sky. 'And we know it's contained in this street?'

`For the moment, it is.'

`So we need to light up the street? That'll destroy it?'

`That's right. Any suggestions?'

Will shivered as he remembered what he'd felt. 'What about the people here?

Shouldn't we try to evacuate them? I could tell them there's a gas leak or

something?'

210

`Good idea, lieutenant,' said the colonel. She turned to face the Doctor. 'Well?

Any ideas?'

The Doctor was pacing up and down. 'Possibly. I could try to materialise my

TARDIS around the entire street. That would... actually, no, that would just be

silly.'

For a moment, they stood in silence.

`Got it!' announced Chaudhry.

Sally Moore slammed her fist down on the desk. The computer had frozen up yet

again. Sighing, she got down on her knees and ducked under the desk, looking for

the plug socket.

Will rang the doorbell of number 32. Then, he leant down and shouted through

the letter box. 'Hello?'

No answer.

`Damn!' He slammed his fist against the door, which, having not been closed

properly, creaked open. 'This is it, Hoff,' he muttered as he stepped into the dark hallway. 'Hello?'

Silence except for his own breathing.

He pressed himself up against the wall and slowly walked along the hallway.

There were two doors. The one coming up on the left was open. The other, at the

end of the corridor, was closed. Carefully, he edged along the wall, moving

towards the open door. The sounds of his heartbeat and breathing grew louder

and louder as he got closer, then —

Then he realised he'd been holding his breath.

The breathing seemed to be coming from the open doorway. Someone was in

there. In the darkness.

`Hello?' His voice sounded thin and scared. He cleared his throat. 'My name is

lieutenant Will Hoffman. I'm here to help.'

`Help me!' whispered a voice. A woman.

`Where are you?' he whispered back.

`He wants to kill me.'

`Where are you?' he called into the dark room.

`He's trying to kill me.'

Ì can help. Where are you?'

`He's always trying to kill me. He thinks I don't know, but I do!' The woman's

voice was getting stronger.

Will cleared his throat again. 'Er... where are you?'

`Behind you.'

Outside, and the first of the trucks arrived.

`Good work, Emily.'

Chaudhry shivered as the sun started to fade from view. 'let's just hope it's not

too late.'

* * *

211

Will screamed as the woman dug her nails into his face. He struggled back to his

feet and, trying to fight her off, fell into the living room. They collapsed onto the floor, sending a nest of tables flying.

`Get off me, you mad cow!' he screamed.

Ì'll kill him!' she shouted. 'I'll kill you all!'

`Why?' Will shoved her away, sending her flying against a fireplace. Pulling

himself away, he backed up against a wall, sending family photos falling to the

floor. 'Why?'

The woman stopped screaming and began to cry. 'Because of the Darkness. It's

everywhere!' Her voice fell to whisper. 'It's in my mind.'

`Fight it!' Will started to try to back out of the room.

Ì can't' she whispered, as she reached down and picked up an ornamental

poker. 'I have to do it.'

Backing away, Will felt something against his feet. He lurched and tried to

steady himself but, arms flailing, found himself falling to the ground. He swore as his head bounced off the skirting board. Dazed, he looked over to see what he had

tripped on. A body. A battered, bloody body.

He tried to back away and stand up at the same time.

`He was going to kill me.' The woman suddenly flung herself on top of Will,

straddling his chest. 'So I killed him first.'

Will struggled to push her off, as she began to raise the poker above his face.

`please! Don't do this!' he begged.

The woman looked down and tilted her head to one side, as if considering her

options. For the first time, her face caught in the dying twilight, Will could see the Darkness in her eyes.

She thrust the poker down.

Will screamed.

And then everything went white.

`How are you feeling?' Colonel Chaudhry turned to a still-shaking Will Hoffman.

Tye been better. She was... she was possessed.' Then he started to laugh.

`What's so funny?' asked Chaudhry, gently.

Ì'm impressed, sir. Really, really impressed. Good plan.'

He looked down the street, shielding his eyes against the bright light emanating

from the floodlighting rigs. Webster Street looked like a film set.

Confused

people, many with injuries, were starting to leave their houses. Many stopped to

stare, dazed, at the BBC vans before being escorted into waiting ambulances.

'What's happening? Are they filming Casualty?' asked a young woman, running

down from the next street

Almost hysterically, Will started to laugh. 'What do you think, Colonel?'

`No,' replied Chaudhry with a deadpan expression. 'It's a new sci-fi series.

Aliens who want to take over the world. That kind of thing.'

The woman looked vaguely disappointed and wandered off.

Èmily!' The Doctor came running over to them, waving his handset. 'It's gone.

Every last trace of it. We did it'

212

Emily Chaudhry watched as an elderly man, confused, covered in blood and

crying for his wife, was helped into an ambulance. 'london survives another day,

then.'

A few minutes later, Will stood outside Lewisham police station, with the colonel

and the Doctor. `So, we really saved the world, then?'

Àll in a day's work, lieutenant,' said Chaudhry.

They stepped aside to let a group of laughing teenage girls past. Will watched as

they went into a nearby pub, a burst of Britney's latest blasting out through the

open door. He looked down the high street as the last of the shops closed, the last of the streetlights lit up and Saturday night started. He laughed. 'We really saved the world! Fancy a pint, Colonel?'

Chaudhry looked at him. 'After the day we've had? Too right, I fancy a pint. What

about...' She stopped as her mobile rang. 'Excuse me.'

As Chaudhry took the call, Will turned to the Doctor. 'Did she tell you? Today

was my first day with UNIT. I still can't believe it.'

The Doctor patted Will's flailing arms, holding them down against his side

'You did an admirable job, Will Hoffman.'

Chaudhry returned, switching off her mobile. 'That was Brimmicombe-Wood.

They've caught a couple of the terrorists.'

`Terrorists?'

`The ones who caused the flooding. He needs us back at HQ. We're in charge.

He's in hospital, apparently.' She shrugged. 'I'm afraid we'll have to postpone that pint, Hoffman.'

`So, we've had guys trying to flood london, *we've* been attacked by aliens and we've had to stop a space vampire. What a day!' Will pulled out his cigarettes and

lit one.

The Doctor took a key out of his pocket. 'What is it they say? These things always

come in threes.'

Chaudhry laughed. 'like london buses.'

The Doctor pushed the key into a lock in the doors of the blue police box. 'You

know, I've always meant to find out why that is.' He pushed open one of the doors.

Ànyone fancy a lift?'

Will resisted the urge to put his hand in the air and beg. Instead, he turned to

Chaudhry with his practised lady-killer grin, raised an eyebrow and oh-so-casually

inhaled on his cigarette.

Òh, no.' Chaudhry was backing away. `No, no, no. We have to get back to HQ.'

The Doctor held open the door. 'Straight back to HQ I promise.'

Four puppy dog eyes looked at Chaudhry.

Òh, all right then.' Chaudhry stalked into the police box. 'But remember, boys,

I'm in charge.'

`Yes, sir!' said the Doctor, saluting. 'After you, Lieutenant. No smoking though.'

Will stubbed out his cigarette and stepped into the police box. The Doctor

followed and closed the doors.

* * *

213

For a second, lewisham High Street was silent and then, as the last of the purple

clouds were subsumed by the dark, night sky, the police box vanished and night

finally descended on london.

214

19.25

Visiting Hours

Eddie Robson

I don't hear him come in. I suppose I must have been engrossed in my book,

which is surprising because the book is really not very good. I spot him over the

top of the page and ask him how long he's been sitting there.

Òh, not long,' he assures me: his voice is warm, gravelly, quite appealing.

I sit up in bed and make sure that my pyjamas are properly closed, which they

are — no reason they shouldn't be, but it'd clearly be embarrassing if I went for

several minutes without noticing. The man in the chair at my bedside is not

somebody I recognise, and I can think of no reason why he should be there. At

another time this might have been a cause for panic, but with recent events having

been what they've been I find myself merely curious. The visitor is small and

crumpled, dark hair cut into a messy fringe. He wears a black suit jacket which is

not a bad piece but needs the creases taken out ofit, baggy checked trousers which

taper down the leg in a way that is not terribly flattering, and a white shirt which has been washed to the colour of chewing gum. I rather

like his polka-dot bow tie,

though, and this just about rescues the ensemble. He fidgets, twiddling his

thumbs, and smiles at me benignly.

`Good is it?' he asks, pointing at the book.

Àwful,' I tell him. 'It's about this detective who doesn't really solve crimes

because he's too stupid, so he just beats people up until he finds out whodunnit.

And all the women in it seem to just be plain evil.'

Òh,' the man says, nonplussed. 'Well, if you don't mind my asking, why have

you read it that far? There are rather too many good books to waste your time with

bad ones.'

Ì don't have any other books,' I say. Ì'd like to get some from home, but I can't

get anyone to bring me any. I ask the nurses for books, and I've even told them the sort of things I like to read, but they keep bringing me books like this.' I pick up the tawdry detective novel and wave it in the air. 'Sometimes I think it's surely got to be better to read it than to stare at the wall, then I read some of it and I change my mind. But it's quite easy to read, I suppose.' I sigh, turning a few pages over.

Òr maybe that's just the problem.' I keep catching myself thinking, good God,

this must be what uneducated people read — which is a horrible thing to think, and

like something my mother would say.

The visitor puts his fingers to his lips, and I think he's thinking. 'Maybe I can

help,' he says, and reaches into the pocket of his jacket. He pulls out a

book called

Cancer Ward and says, 'Oh, no,' when he sees the title. 'You probably don't want to be reading that.' He stuffs it back and reaches into the other pocket, eventually

producing two other paperbacks: Kidnapped, by Robert Louis Stevenson, and

Gulliver's Travels . He beams when he sees these titles and rocks back in his seat.

217

Òh, yes, these are much better. Adventure's just the thing when you're cooped up

in bed. Would you like to borrow them?'

'I would, very much,' I reply, and he hands them to me after writing 'Property of

the Doctor' in pencil in the front of each one. (He has a pencil! Oh, the envy!) I

place them on the bedside table and notice for the first time that a bunch of white grapes has appeared in the bowl. 'Are these your doing as well?' I ask.

He doesn't answer, and when I look at him he's peering over at Jamie, the boy

in the next bed to mine. When Jamie was awake I was irked by his incorrigible

flirting, his clumsy and sometimes patronising attempts at making conversation.

But I miss it now, and I think he was quite good-natured, and I feel quite evil for the tiny moment of relief I experienced upon realising that he had slipped into a

coma.

Ì said, did you bring these?' I ask my visitor.

He turns his attention back to me, apologises, and nods.

`Thank you,' I tell him, then ask, 'Who are you?'

He takes a deep breath and says, quite slowly and deliberately, 'I'm nothing to

do with the hospital. Oh, I suppose this is more of a clinic really, isn't it? But I'm known as the Doctor.'

His reassurance doesn't work: my muscles tense up, unbidden, and I start to

flatten against the headboard (which is silly really, it's not like I can escape by sliding up the wall). 'You're a doctor?'

`No, no,' he says, holding up his hands. 'I'm *the* Doctor. I assure you, Miss Woods, I'm just here to visit.'

I wonder how he knows my name, but then realise that it's written on the chart

at the foot of my bed. Instead of asking that I say, 'Why are you visiting me?'

The Doctor glances over at Jamie, then at the floor. 'Actually,' he says, 'I came to visit him. But when I arrived and he wasn't awake, I thought it seemed a bit of a

waste, the grapes and what have you.'

Finally, this rings true. He's probably a relative of Jamie's: they are, in a strange way, reminiscent of each other. I should probably feel more wary of him than I do,

as I am in a rather vulnerable position here, but the days have been so empty and

punctuated with doom and worry, the Doctor's appearance is a welcome

distraction. 'Why didn't you just say so in the first place?' I ask.

He shifts in his chair. 'I didn't want you to feel second best,' he says. 'I thought it might seem nicer if I'd come specially to see you.'

I allow myself a smile. 'For future reference, it didn't.'

He smiles back. 'Do you mind if I sit with you?'

`No,' I say, because I can't see the harm, 'but maybe you ought to sit with him.

I've heard that people in comas can hear what you say to them '

He glances at Jamie again. `No, I don't think that that's true. Not in his case,

anyway.' He looks back to me. 'You weren't expecting any other visitors, were

you?'

I sigh. `No, nobody. I haven't had any visitors since I was admitted.'

The Doctor gives me a quizzical look. 'Nobody? No family? No friends?'

`No, nobody. Well, I don't know if my family would have come anyway. It all

happened very suddenly, so I never got to tell anybody where I was going. I'm not

allowed to use the telephone or pens and paper —'

`Why not?'

`Well, I say not allowed, but it's more that none of us has one and they won't

bring us any. So if we want to send a message it goes via the staff; but — um —

nothing seems to happen. It's the same for everybody.'

Èverybody?'

Èverybody on the ward,' I clarify. Not many of us have had visitors. Actually I

don't think anybody's had a visitor since I got here. They announce visiting hours

but nobody ever turns up. Was it difficult for you to get here?'

Òh...' says the Doctor. 'I can be quite persuasive.'

I lean forward and reply, 'You mean they tried to stop...' but the movement makes

me feel dizzy and I break off the sentence to lie —

... as though the lights have been turned out, but now I'm standing upright and

although it's completely black here I look down at myself and I can see my own

body and clothes as though it were daylight, which is how it always happens

although this is the first one for a few hours at least. I'm no longer wearing my

pyjamas from the hospital, but my favourite outfit — my short olive-green skirt, my boots, my white silk Chinese shirt and my long purple coat, although it isn't cold

or warm or anything much in here. I don't seem to be able to get a level footing,

my feet sink into the floor like quicksand, and as I look down I can't even see what I'm standing on. I look back up and see a young man who perhaps I recognise

physically preventing two other men from engaging in fisticuffs. There are voices

around me as I fall...

— can hear the Doctor asking me if I'm all right, and once I've nodded and sat up

in bed he acts as though nothing has happened and I resist the temptation to ask

him how long I was out for this time. I really want to know, because the nurses

always refuse to tell me, but I don't want to make a fuss over it because he isn't

making a fuss over it. I also don't tell him about the dream I always have every time it happens. The Doctor looks around the ward, then turns back to me. 'Would you

like to play cards?' he asks, and finds a pack in his pocket. 'What would you like to play?'

I shake my head to clear the unconsciousness fuzz. 'What can you play?' I ask.

`More or less everything.'

I believe him, but I wish I could test what he says. I wish I knew an obscure card

game taught to me by a Russian grandmother, but I don't have a Russian

grandmother. 'How about rummy?'

He motions for me to move my legs slightly and we smooth down a small part

of the bed on which he can deal the cards. He shuffles the deck, making more of

a show of doing it than he needs to, then offers it to me. 'Would you like to shuffle as well?'

`No,' I say. 'I trust you.'

Òh?' he says, starting to deal. 'In the habit of trusting strangers, are you?'

`No, I'm just quite shallow. I tend to judge by appearances, and you don't look

like a man who'd cheat at cards.'

`Don't I?' he says. 'Not even if the world depended on it?'

I laugh. 'Why would the world depend on you winning a hand of rummy?'

`You'd be surprised,' he says, organising his cards in his hand.

`Why are you asking, anyway? Don't you want me to trust you?'

`Yes, but I'm trying to get a sort of picture of who you are.' Then he adds: 'How

long have you been here?'

I close my eyes and attempt to segregate the days in my head. 'Six days, I think...

or is it only five?' He wants me to tell it all, doesn't he? Well, I don't mind. 'I passed out whilst I was on my lunch break. I work at a clothes boutique on the King's

Road.'

`What kind of boutique?'

À small one.'

`What kind of clothes?'

Ùnisex. lots of kinds. Not your kind, though. Fashionable stuff.'

He bristles at this, straightening his lapels, but says nothing.

`We were still selling mainly mod fashions when I started working there,' I tell

him, putting down a five of clubs and picking up a queen of diamonds he's just

discarded, 'but we moved *away* from that, which was partly my idea although my boss, Graham, takes most of the credit. It's a good shop, I think. We've just

recently had in a collection of hand-dyed safari suits designed by The Fool. Eric

Clapton wears one. He didn't get it from us but we still use it as a selling point.'

I'm going on, aren't I, and I've lost him: he's nodding, but I'm just going on. 'You know,' I say, taking a different tack, 'you could probably get the creases out of that jacket if you hung it in the bathroom well away from water and let the steam work

on it. Also, you could get those cuffs taken in no more than half an inch and not

only would they fit better, it'd hide those frayed ends.'

I thought he'd appreciate the advice, but his lips shift into an indignant sulk. `So you fainted, did you?'

Ì passed out. Fainting's what you do when you're distressed by something. I was

just sitting in a park eating a sandwich, I was fine. Well, I really don't remember anything else until I was in the hospital, apart from odd flashes of the sky over the park and being picked up off the ground. I was in an ordinary hospital at first.

Then after a few hours they told me I'd be transferred here, for specialised

treatment.'

`For what?'

`For specialised treatment,' I repeat, making the effort to enunciate more clearly.

`No, no, specialised treatment for what?'

He doesn't say it impatiently, and I think I really knew what he meant but I

didn't want to say it because it seems so stupid. 'I don't know,' I admit. 'I keep

passing out like I did in the park, and like I did just then. It's not that unusual, you know. Everybody on this ward's been doing the same. But I don't know what's

wrong with me and neither does anybody else in here.'

`Haven't you asked the doctors here?'

`They won't say.'

Òh? Why don't you leave?'

I lean towards the Doctor and speak quietly. 'They won't let me.'

He does the same. 'Have you tried?'

`No,' I admit. 'But I've asked, and they said no. But other people have tried. I

wonder if we've all got some horrible infectious disease and they're trying not to

cause a panic by hiding us away. I actually don't even know where we are.' The

clinic is in an old building, older than my parents' house, and with more expansive grounds. From here you can't see anything beyond the trees.

The Doctor reorganises his cards. 'Doesn't any of this worry you?'

Ìt did for the first couple of days, but you can't remain in a state of high anxiety forever. I'm just waiting to see what happens next..' I look over at my fellow

patients. We must all have the same thing, and it seems like eventually we all fall into those comas, like Jamie did the other day. At last count, six of the nine of us had slipped away like that The other two are asleep, so for all I know they might

be gone too. That just leaves me. That is what I expect to happen next

`What do you think is wrong?' asks the Doctor. 'I mean how do you feel?'

Ì feel fine, really. A little weak sometimes, lacking in energy.' Although, to be

honest, I actually feel clearer-headed because I'm not getting stoned daily in the

back of the shop with Graham and Marianne, arguing endlessly about which side

of the new Beatles' album is best. (I say side three, Marianne likes side one and

Graham, perverse as ever, insists that side four is best but says the new Kinks'

long-player is much better anyway and really underrated.) I miss them more than

my family and I'd rather there *was* something funny going on and they don't know where I am. If they know where I am and they just haven't come, then they just

don't really care. I want them to have put posters of me all over Chelsea: 'Have you **seen** this girl?' Although I'm not sure they'll have any good pictures of me.

The Doctor is looking at me in a strange way, and I say, 'What?'

`Nothing,' he says. `No obvious signs —

... time I'm lying down, which is a new one, I suppose, and I don't feel so shaky.

In fact, that treacly sensation under my feet has more or less gone. I look up and the shape of a young man stands out against the velvety blackness, and above a

murmur of voices I hear his:

Òh, hello there!'

The young man breaks into that familiar grin, half-charming, half-leering. 'It's

Eleanor, isn't it?'

`Jamie?' I ask, and hope that my dreaming about him is not significant.

Àye,' he says, and I notice that he's wearing a kilt: this seems strange until I

remember his telling me once that was what he usually wore, when not in hospital

pyjamas. What an odd thing to have remembered, let alone to have placed in the

correct context. Jamie reaches out his hand to help me up and! refuse it, telling him that I'm perfectly capable of getting up on my own, just as the floor seems to melt away beneath my shoulders and I topple backwards, away from him and into...

* * *

— lift my head from the pillow just in time to see the Doctor being brusquely

èscorted' out of the room by the ward sister, a tall dark-haired woman in her

thirties who wears a one-piece dress of such deep navy that it might as well be

black.

`How did you get in here anyway?' she asks the struggling Doctor.

`Through the door,' the Doctor replies.

'I didn't see you.'

Ì don't like to bother people.'

The sister looks up at me. 'Is he your visitor?'

`No,' says the Doctor, 'she's just borrowing me for a while. I came to visit Jamie

there, but he's not awake.'

`No,' says the sister, following his gaze. 'And I'm afraid he's not likely to be any time soon. Besides,' she says with a rather pointed glance at me, 'visiting hours

are over.'

Òh, nonsense. It's not *even* —' he squints at the upside-down watch on the sister's pocket eight o'clock.'

`Please, sir, the patients need their rest.' And she tugs at the Doctor's arm.

As the Doctor goes he howls in protest: 'Good heavens... really is no need... I

only *needed* an eight of hearts to win that round!' The cries fade out. I

pick up his dropped hand of cards and he was quite right, although I had the eight of hearts

in my own hand and intended to hold onto it, so he wouldn't have won. The fact

that he thought he might have won means that he didn't look at my cards whilst I

was unconscious, so at least he was honest.

A minute or so later the sister returns, by which time I have hidden the Doctor's

books under the bedclothes. Ìf anybody else comes in here,' she tells me, 'ring the bell at once. We're not expecting anybody.' She glares at my grapes, then walks out of the *ward.* Personally, I've never heard of any hospital where you make

appointments for visiting hours. Their treatment of the Doctor doesn't surprise

me, though. Nothing that happens here surprises me any more.

Well, that was relatively exciting. What now?

Of the two books brought by the Doctor I decide to read Gulliver's *Travels* first and open it up, but before Gulliver has even set sail from Bristol I hear a knock at the window to the right of my bed and turn to see the Doctor standing there in the

rain. He indicates for me to let him in, and at first I'm not quite sure. Maybe it

would be better if he went away? But he knocks on the window again, and I slowly

get out of bed and onto my feet (I'm not sure what causes me to pass out, but I do

try not to move around too much), then I slide the window up, allowing him to

hop inside.

`What are you doing?' I ask, and he puts a finger to his lips.

`There's something very important that I didn't get a chance to do,' he whispers,

and ushers me back to my bed. He walks around to the other side and sits in his

chair again. 'I don't want her to come back,' he says, still whispering. 'We'll have to be quiet. Do you mind if we just play some more cards whilst I wait?'

We play another hand of rummy, which the Doctor wins, then another, which I

win. The Doctor looks around nervously, glancing over his shoulder, peering

down the ward at the other patients. He only just stops himself from yelping out

with delight when he gets the card he needs to complete a second winning hand.

I pass my own cards over to him and he shuffles the deck once more, this time

throwing in a few simple magician's nicks (which his short fingers make a slight

hash of) and looking up at me to see whether I'm impressed. The cards in motion

blur before my eyes, but as I watch everything around them blurs too and the

Doctor drops the cards and takes hold of my left hand — at least I think it's the

Doctor, I can't think who else —

... standing up this time in the same old velvety blackness, another variation on the same old dream, although I abruptly become aware of my left side being weighed

down. I look to my left arm and see the Doctor grasping my hand with both of his

and dangling beneath me as though there is no ground for him to stand on, which

is new.

Òh, my word!' he howls, kicking his feet in the abyss. He is not at all as heavy

as I would have expected. 'Oh, dear! I don't suppose you could pull me up at all?'

I do, and to my surprise it is easy. He raises his feet until they are level with mine, and then he appears able to stand in the way that I do. I open my hand, but the

Doctor protests nervously and continues to hold onto me. 'Don't let go,' he

stresses. 'I think that would break the connection, and you might be stuck here for good.'

`Connection?' I ask, and then, 'Stuck?' I start to become aware that this dream

has lasted longer than usual, and for the first time I get an inkling that it's not a dream after all. 'Oh, God. Am I dead? Are you...?' He doesn't *look* like... but who knows?

He pauses for thought. 'I would so like to give you a definitive answer, but I'm

not entirely sure I can.'

I ask for a rough guess.

Àll right,' he says. 'I don't think so. I think it would have been more difficult for me to follow you here if you were dead.'

`Follow?' I ask: another one-word question.

He grins at me. 'Yes. little trick I picked up in Tibet. I say picked up, actually it took me three years and they said I was a fast learner.' His expression becomes

more serious. 'That's why you shouldn't let go. I'm just tagging —'

`Hey, Doctor!' calls a voice from behind us. A crowd is approaching:

not a very

large one — I count seven people — but a crowd nonetheless, and at the front of it

stands Jamie. As we meet, the Doctor claps him on the shoulder. `So,' says Jamie,

`they got you too did they?'

The Doctor looks affronted. 'They most certainly did not "get" me! This is a combination investigative and rescue mission. I sneaked in with Miss Woods

here.'

Jamie looks at me, and there's that grin again until he notices that the Doctor is

holding my hand, his eyes narrow and he says, 'Hey...'

Òh, never mind that now. Who do you mean by "they"? What's been happening here?'

'Did you say he's a doctor?' breaks in one of the crowd, a tall man in his twenties with a coarse voice. I've seen the faces in this crowd, when I saw this place before, but never long enough to really give it much thought — but they're all people from

the ward, the others in the comas. The impressions always faded when I woke up,

like dreams do, but now I look I can see who all of them are. I suppose I had always assumed that being surrounded by these people all day had led to them seeping

into my dreams, but now I come to think of it, I've been seeing them since the very first time — since before I came to the clinic...

'Aye,' says Jamie.

'He's not something to do with this business, is he?' asks *the* other man, whose name I think is William Scott. 'Because if he is...'

'No, no,' dismisses Jamie. 'He's nothing to do with any of it. Now look,

if you

keep quiet he might have a way out of here.' Whilst the others talk amongst

themselves, Jamie turns back to the Doctor. 'Have you?'

The Doctor looks awkward. 'Why don't you tell me what you know first?'

Jamie shrugs. 'Not much. But somebody's doing this on purpose, I'm sure of it.

When I was back in the ward I tried to get away — and they *shot at* me!'

The Doctor gasps. 'Oh, my word!'

'Aye. Well, nearly. They said they were going to, at any rate. Anyway, we all start off there, and we see this place in little flashes, and then we end up here for good.

It's happened to all of us. Have you found anything out?'

'Not really, no, although they tried to stop me from getting in.,I don't think they have the best intentions, and I think somebody — probably them — designed the

disease and exposed people to it with some purpose in mind. But...' the Doctor

looks around what? And why trap everybody *here?'*

A middle-aged woman dressed in a nasty powder-blue twinset pushes her way

past the pinstripe-suited Mr Gilbert-Jones (from the bed diagonally opposite mine

— a nice old fellow, but deeply chauvinistic) and brings herself to the Doctor's

attention. 'It's the Soviets,' she says: as I recall, her name is Mrs Abner. 'I'm sure of it. I read about them in the paper. They're brainwashing people so they can use

them as assassins on the royal family!'

'Oh, for pity's sake,' says a man of about forty with long, straggly hair — Mr

Lyndon? Mr landon? Something like that. liked him at first, but went off him

when he said that by working in the shop I was superficially leeching from anti-

establishment culture and taking money back to the establishment, and we should

sell our clothes for no more than cost and refuse to pay tax, and then he quoted

some Trotsky at me. He's one of the ones I thought was still awake: obviously he

must have slipped away earlier today. 'Would that be before or after they land on

the moon and paint it red?'

'They can do both!' shouts Mrs Abner, and it's already getting quite heated. Mr

Scott is also shouting at Mr lyndon (it'll do) and the Doctor has to intercede and

quieten everybody down.

Once silence is restored, I return to Jamie's earlier question. 'Can you get us out of here, Doctor?'

The Doctor takes a deep breath. 'I do have *some* experience with situations such 2 24

as this, yes. Now, I have a theory: I'm not supposed to... actually everybody should be listening to this.' He raises his voice, as a couple of the others have started

talking again. 'I say, would you mind just listening to this?' The chatter dies down.

`Thank you. As I say, I'm not supposed to be *here.* I came in of my own accord, I'm a random element, so I think this place will let me out fairly easily. It probably

doesn't really understand how I got in.' He talks about the place as if it were alive, which is fair I suppose as it's certainly not like any place I've ever seen. 'The trick is to take all of you with me.'

`What?' says somebody, launching a new babble of speech.

Ì don't —'

`There should —'

`Who are —'

`Don't get —'

And before long it's impossible to hear yourself think, and the noise gets worse

as arguments start to break out, mostly discarding the Doctor's idea as gibberish.

Jamie rolls his eyes. 'Here they go again...'

Òh?' asks the Doctor.

Àye. They've been like this since I got here. The slightest thing and they start

shouting at each other.'

`Well,' I say, 'they *have* been cooped up together all this time. It's sort of understandable.'

`You've not seen them,' says Jamie. 'They've been ready to kill sometimes. I

think they would've done if I'd not stopped them.'

`You stopped them?' says the Doctor, sounding a little surprised.

Àye. I told them —' and here he makes a clear effort to remember just what it was

that he told them `— it would be more constructive if we all worked together instead of arguing. I thought it'd be what you'd have done if you were here.'

The Doctor looks delighted. 'Well done,' he says. 'Now, I wonder what

would

work best..' He searches his pockets again, examining bent paper clips and pieces

of string, as well as a pocket knife. He gives much of this stuff to me to hold.

Eventually he settles upon a small bottle of bubble mixture and asks me to hold

this too, before removing the lid — which has one of those bubble-blowing things

inside it. He reaches out and gently probes the air with the bubble-blower, and

there are a few sarcastic comments made by the others, until they start to realise

that a little of the fabric of the blackness (this is as best as I can describe it) is coming away, sticking to the ring of the bubble-blower. The Doctor slowly pulls it

close to his lips, blows, and lining myself up alongside him I can see a small

bubble of blackness drift away into a lighter space beyond.

The Doctor pokes his finger into the hole he's made and asks Jamie to help him

stretch it out Gradually they work the hole into a large rent, big enough to step

through, and beyond it we can all clearly see the familiar space of the ward, albeit from an unfamiliar angle.

The Doctor turns to face everybody. 'Now,' he says, 'I think it's trying to let *me* leave.'

`What is?' asks somebody before he can continue — I remember her name as

being Tabitha Stevenson. She has long, blonde, curled hair and wears

a yellow and

orange smock that reaches down to her feet, which are bare.

The Doctor turns up his free palm (he's still holding my hand) and looks

around. 'This place,' he says. 'This is what I was trying to tell you all. It's a

controlled environment and I'm not supposed to be in it. It's been gradually

drawing the rest ofyou in, but I might upset the balance. So it's let me open a door.

Now, I don't know how adept it'll be at dealing with this situation — it might close up at any moment. So I suggest that we form a chain, go through as fast as we can,

and I'll go last. Agreed?

Nobody knows quite what to say to this grinning stranger.

The Doctor glances around. 'Anybody else with another idea, then?'

A murmur passes through the group, indicating their assent. I hear Mr Scott

make a comment, but I don't hear exactly what it is. Apparently Miss Stevenson

does, however.

Òh, you really are the most vile excuse for a human being...' she says to Mr

Scott, not ostentatiously but she certainly doesn't care if the rest of us hear. Jamie takes my hand and a couple of the others link onto him, but Mr Scott and Miss

Stevenson make no move towards us.

`What did I say?' asks Mr Scott.

`Please,' says the Doctor, ìf you could —'

`You know very well what you said,' says Miss Stevenson.

Ànd I'd say it again,' says Mr Scott. 'Of course, anything I said'd be the wrong

thing as far as you're concerned, wouldn't it?'

`Probably, yes.'

Èxactly. Because I'm a bloke.'

`Not just because you're a "bloke",' Miss Stevenson replies, the last word sounding desperately awkward in her mouth, like something inedible. 'Because

you are the worst possible type of "bloke".'

A decent one, you mean?'

Òh, dear...' says the Doctor. 'Could the rest of you please...?' He motions for

everybody else to join the chain.

Miss Stevenson laughs. 'Define "decent".'

Ì pay my way,' says Mr Scott. 'Unlike some people.'

Ì work for something I believe in.'

`So do I. Every day.'

`lies. Everything you write. You realise that you're just upholding the same

status quo which mitigates against people like you in every way?'

`Looks out for people like me. More than I can say for you. You want something

for nothing, your sort do. Always something for nothing.'

Ì won't be judged by your meaningless, antiquated standards!' Miss Stevenson

shouts, pushing him away from herself.

`Don't touch me, you little hippie tart!' he yells, pushing back. They

both fall to the ground, grappling wildly, and as their hands flail and tear alarmingly at each

other I notice that the light seems to be draining from Mr Scott, whilst Miss

Stevenson glows all the brighter.

The rest of us, meanwhile, have formed a chain as the Doctor asked. 'Right,' he

says, 'I think we shall have to leave them to it, I'm afraid. The gentleman at the

front there — I'm sorry, your name was?'

`Mr Gilbert-Miles,' he responds from the very front.

`Mr Gilbert-Miles, hello! When I say run, could you run back in this direction

and through the door here?'

`Righto,' says Mr Gilbert-Miles.

`Good. And everybody else, you all follow him through. Ready?'

A hesitant 'yes' comes from the assembled group.

`Right,' says the Doctor. `Run!'

And Mr Gilbert-Miles sets off at a surprising pace, running past us in the other

direction and rather thankfully blocking my view of Mr Scott and Miss Stevenson,

who must surely be injuring each other quite badly by now. The ground, such as it

is in this place, is beginning to shake: the exit shifts and twists, but remains just steady enough for Mr Gilbert-Miles to dash through it, pulling everybody after

them and finishing with Jamie and me and the Doctor. I look over my

shoulder at

the Doctor as we approach the way out and see that he is looking over his own

shoulder at Mr Scott and Miss Stevenson. It is now difficult to make out their

forms as they have become rough shapes of light and dark, wrestling violently

with each other. The Doctor, not looking where he's going and thrown by the jerks

that have passed along the chain to him, falls to the ground. Unable to let go of

either him or Jamie, I cannot pick him up but I do drag him through the exit as

quickly as I can manage.

Once outside, we all collapse to the ground and behind us the exit begins to

close itself up, though I can still see inside and the Doctor and I watch as what was until quite recently Mr Scott and Miss Stevenson are consumed in a flash of light

and a shattering roar. Then the tear in the space of the ward is gone, and I can hear nothing except the wind rattling the windows.

I ask the Doctor what it was, before anybody else gets a chance to.

Àt the — oh, dear,' he says, still panting for breath. 'At the beginning of this

universe, there was matter and antimatter.' He gesticulates a demonstration of

this. 'And they collided, creating an explosion which, ah, which led to all this, I suppose. The world and universe you know. Everything expanded outwards.'

The relevance of this is...?

Ànd what I think we just saw in ***there,'*** the Doctor continues, `was an

attempt to create something similar. Out here, Mr Scott and Miss Stevenson were

philosophically opposed. They were placed in an environment where this was

exaggerated and translated into a, a sort of physical opposition. It just goes to show

—' He looks around the room. 'Actually, maybe we should continue this discussion

once we've all got back inside ourselves?'

I also look up and see myself, lying unconscious in my bed on the ward, with a

sleeping Doctor slumped in the chair and holding onto my hand. The rest of our

little party is similarly duplicated here, where all of them have lain for days. I stand and approach my own bed, reach out towards myself and...

* * *

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— feel a hand removed from mine and open my eyes to realise that it was the

Doctor's hand: of course it was, it's been the Doctor's all along. I yawn, suddenly feeling sluggish. 'God,' I say when I'm done yawning. 'Can you do that any time

you want to? Step outside yourself?'

He grins. Ì'm afraid I'm not that good. Not yet, anyway. I always mean to hone

the skill, but I never seem to get around to it. Need a spare decade or two, really.'

Àye,' says a voice from the bed next to mine. 'Something more urgent always

comes up, eh, Doctor?' Jamie swings his feet around to the other side of the bed.

`Well, quite,' says the Doctor, and raises a finger. 'Speaking of which.' He rises

from the chair and straightens his jacket (not that it actually gets any straighter as a result of this action). Jamie, dressed once more in hospital pyjamas, steps to his side.

`Where are you going?' I ask.

Òh,' says the Doctor, 'this was quite clearly done deliberately, and I'm afraid

that I don't like it one little bit. So I think Jamie and I should go and find out what this was all for and put an end to the whole scheme one way or another,

particularly as it appears to have worked.'

Ànd find Zoe,' adds Jamie.

Òh, yes,' says the Doctor. 'Yes, although I'm sure she's fine...'

`What else were you going to say?' I ask.

`When?'

À minute ago. You said "it goes to show". Goes to show what?'

The Doctor looks surprised. 'Really?' He ponders for a few seconds. 'I really

can't remember. Sorry.' He looks up. 'Come along, Jamie. Goodbye, Miss Woods.'

He and Jamie stride towards the door, Jamie shooting a smile and a 'Bye' at me

as he goes.

`What about your books?' I call after him, but there's no answer. So I decide to

keep them.

21.58

Before Midnight

Andy Russell

Charley watched as the Doctor fiddled with the TARDIS's controls. He had

removed his bottle-green coat, rolled up his shirt sleeves and set to work some

time ago.

Slumped in an armchair, Charley glanced pointedly at her wristwatch — a

present from the Doctor — and sighed, stretching and looking around the TARDIS

in an effort to find something to engage her interest.

`What's the matter, Charley?' asked the Doctor, without looking up.

Ì'm bored,' she said, pouting. 'You've been at it for simply ages.'

`Piloting the TARDIS with the level of accuracy I intend to achieve requires

patience and great skill,' he replied, wafting away the smoke that was rising from

an overheating component.

Charley leaped up and hurried over to the console. 'Are we going somewhere

nice?'

The Doctor finally looked up, smiling. 'I thought we could all do with a holiday.

Where's C'rizz?'

`He asked me to show him where the library was. Said he wanted to

learn a bit

more about this universe.'

As if on cue, the Eutermesan strolled into the console room, his attention

focused on a newspaper. 'I have been in the library,' he announced.

`We can tell.' Charley laughed. 'Your skin's gone all dusty.'

Èxtremely amusing,' said C'rizz. He turned to the Doctor. 'I've been reading

about your favourite planet, Mirth.'

Èarth,' corrected the Doctor.

Èarth,' said C'rizz. 'Sorry. From what I've been able to find out, it seems a

violent and lawless place — much like the rest of this universe. I have read of wars that have engulfed the whole world. Examples of mankind's cruelty are without

number. Crimes committed for no apparent reason such as the Jack the Ripper

murders —'

`Just because no one ever discovered the rationale behind a crime,' said the

Doctor, `doesn't mean there was none.'

`Perhaps we should go and find out,' suggested Charley

Èr... perhaps.'

Ì'd like to know more about this,' said C'rizz, handing his newspaper, a copy of

the Bath Times, to the Doctor.

`Mmm, interesting.' He started to read aloud. '"Mystery surrounds a break-in at the offices of city solicitors MacDonald, O'Brien and Withers. Police apprehended

Anthony James Dunn, a well-known figure in the local criminal fraternity, at the

scene, yet Dunn denies responsibility for the crime. His solicitor later confirmed, **231**

however, that his client had asked for over a hundred other offences to be taken

into consideration.

"The mystery deepened when the three security guards on duty at the time of

the incident claimed to have no recollection of events leading up to the arrest.

Later, senior partner Ms Sarah MacDonald confirmed that nothing had been

stolen.'" The Doctor folded the newspaper in half

`Mystery?' he said. 'Nonsense, there'll be an explanation. I'll prove my point.

let's go and find out what —' The Doctor looked up suddenly as a deeply sonorous

chiming reverberated around the console room. The cloister bell?' he asked no

one in particular. He tugged on a lever and the ceiling above their heads resolved

into a vision of the tumultuous multicoloured chaos of the space-time vortex.

Charley saw a jagged streak of brilliant white light arcing its way towards them.

`Chronic energy!' yelled the Doctor over the chimes and growing roar of power.

Ìt's going to hit us,' shouted Charley. Following her lead, C'rizz gripped the

edge of the console; the Doctor wrestled with the controls. It was too

late. With a booming flash, the light hit the TARDIS.

In his spaceship's cockpit, Darrakhaan's long reptilian fingers, each one tipped

with a vicious talon, played over the control panel. The computerised voice of his

craft's mainframe said, 'Exit from hyperspace complete at **22.00** Galactic Meridian Time.'

He tapped at a series of buttons. 'This is Darrakhaan begging leave to address

the Grand Mother of Family Myrrhaan.'

The ship's encrypted carrier beam guaranteed a hot line to the matriarch of

Family Myrrhaan on Dega IV. A holographic image resolved itself in the air above

the control panel. The Grand Mother's green scales, dried and shrivelled with age,

were stretched over a bloated face, her wide, down-turned maw overcrowded with

yellow broken fangs. Her great age was belied by the fact that her red eyes burned

with a fierce intelligence and her forked tongue was still sharp enough to instil

fear in those unfortunate enough to fall under her influence.

`Darrakhaan,' she wheezed dismissively. 'Your justification for this intrusion

had better be beyond reproach.'

`Grand Mother,' he began, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. 'Accept honour

from your most devoted —'

`Cut the crap, broodling,' she barked. 'You dishonour the family with

your

continued existence when it decreed otherwise.'

Darrakhaan swallowed dryly. 'I am close to the Sanmarus Institute, Grand

Mother.'

`Why? Going to get yourself an education?'

Ì recently visited Bosrun's Colony, Grand Mother,' persisted Darrakhaan, trying

to ignore the slight. 'There, rumours were rife that the miners had been asked to

provide certain minerals to the scientists of the Sanmarus Institute.' He paused,

hoping for dramatic effect. 'Minerals vital to research into temporal physics. I

thought you might like the technology,' he finished casually.

The Grand Mother leaned hungrily forwards, her forked tongue flicking at her

lips. 'The ability to travel in time would have enormous benefits for the...

"undertakings" of the family,' she said, eyes narrowing in thought. 'From a hatchling, you have been a disappointment to the family, Darrakhaan. When I

excommunicated you I intended that it should be final. However, if you succeed in

this venture —' she visibly shuddered, as if what she was about to say was against

all instinct I may reconsider.'

`Thank you, Grand Mother,' breathed Darrakhaan, head bowed.

The Grand Mother of Family Myrrhaan held up a gnarled and twisted claw. Ìf

you should fail,' she hissed, 'I would advise you not to come within a billion light years of Dega IV.' The hologram flickered off.

Darrakhaan set course for the Sanmarus Institute and operated his ship's

cloaking device.

`The Sanmarus Institute,' announced the Doctor.

Charley blinked slowly, wondering what she had missed. The Doctor was

already hammering away at the TARDIS's control panels. `Doctor...' she said.

`What happened? You said something about... chronic energy?'

Òh, I'm sure it was nothing,' he said dismissively. 'look — the Sanmarus

Institute!'

`Sanmarus,' asked C'rizz.

The Doctor indicated the simulation of local space projected over their heads.

As they watched, Charley realised that the scanner was zooming in on the only

object in this area of empty space. It was a vast structure of spheres, connected by tubes. It revolved slowly, millions of tiny lights sparkling across its surfaces.

À deep-space research station in the void between galaxies,' explained the

Doctor.

C'rizz looked unimpressed. 'Why so far out?'

Ìt's kept at a safe distance from the nearby galaxies due to the nature of the

research carried out there. Some of it is positively apocalyptic.' The Doctor flicked a series of switches and pulled a lever. The TARDIS's materialisation noise told

them they'd landed. 'Ready?' he said, dashing for the door.

Charley exchanged a glance with C'rizz before the pair of them followed him.

A tall creature was waiting for them outside. 'Greetings, Doctor,' he said in a

high-pitched sing-song voice. 'Miss Pollard, C'rizz, welcome to the Sanmarus

Institute. I am Director Zalaron '

The director must have been ten feet tall, with translucent golden skin. His long

legs, where they could be seen beneath flowing white robes, were tentacular, each

ending in three elegant toes. His four arms were similar but, instead of fingers,

each sported a bloom of delicately waving fronds. His head, supported on its long

neck, was hard to see properly, but Charley could just make out two large brown

eyes regarding her with benign interest.

`How do you know who we are?' asked C'rizz.

The cowlike eyes seemed to smile indulgently. 'I assure you, my friends, all will

become clear to you. Now, if you would care to follow me, I know you will be eager

to experience the Collective, Doctor.'

The Collective?' The Doctor beamed. 'Oh, absolutely. Can't wait.'

At a wave of Zalaron's hand, a door slid aside and he led the way out into the

corridor.

`What's the Collective?' whispered Charley as she and the Doctor stepped

through the doorway.

`Haven't a clue,' he whispered back from the side of his mouth, 'but I'm sure all

will become clear.'

A grey robot hovered out into the corridor behind them, emitting a series

of bleeps and electronic burbles, lights flashing urgently all over its cylindrical body.

`Yes,' said Zalaron at length. 'Please go and make our other guest welcome. We

shall take care of him in good time.'

As the drone sped off down the corridor, Zalaron led the Doctor, Charley and

C'rizz off in the other direction.

Darrakhaan inched through a bulkhead and on to the Institute. He remained in a

hidden position for a full minute, breathing deeply, long narrow head sweeping

back and forth, his eyes searching for danger. His ship was docked outside the

bulkhead. It was a risk, but it was unlikely it would be noticed in the short time

he'd be here.

Reassuring himself that his entrance had gone undetected, Darrakhaan strode

across to a computer terminal on the wall. Removing a compact electronic device

from within his body armour, Darrakhaan operated its controls. With a high-

pitched whine, a screen came to life. Data began to download from the station's

computers.

A soft chime told Darrakhaan when the transfer was complete. He hissed with

satisfaction as he studied the electronic plans of the Institute. He was about to

move offwhen a wave of nausea flooded through his body, robbing him of breath

and making his head swim. Without warning, his legs gave way beneath him, and

searing heat built in the centre of his chest The warmth faded as quickly as it

came, however, leaving Darrakhaan feeling as if something important was

suddenly missing.

A vision formed before his eyes: a circular *device* on a chain floating in the air before him. The disc was golden, a green stone pulsing with energy at its centre.

As he watched, the amulet started spinning faster and faster, receding along the

corridor, rapidly dwindling from view. In his mind's eye he saw its destination,

almost subconsciously relating the route he would need to take to the map he had

just downloaded.

He had been granted a vision of his prize.

As the tremors in his limbs began to subside, Darrakhaan gathered his strength

and hauled himself to his feet, taking a deep breath and holding it in to steady his nerves.

He *was* further *down the corridor. Near a synthetic food dispenser.* A security *drone hovered out from concealment, its* weaponry spitting fire. There *was* an explosion of light behind his *eyes and then nothing.*

Darrakhaan shook his head, clearing the pain of the vision. The food dispenser

was on the right, about ten metres down the corridor. He took a canister from his

waist, tugged it free and tossed it towards the dispenser. As it hit the floor it

exploded, clouds of thick smoke billowing up and obscuring everything in the

immediate vicinity.

Darrakhaan sprinted down the corridor, a long-barrelled laser pistol in his

hand. Drawing level with the food dispenser, he aimed the weapon at a concealed

alcove behind it and fired. He got immense satisfaction when the hidden drone,

his would-be executioner, exploded with a surprised squawk of overloading

circuits.

Charley was beginning to feel distinctly disorientated. Za laron was leading them

along yet another seemingly identical corridor, and the constant changes of

direction had long since loosened her grip on such mundane concepts as left and

right, up or down.

The others seemed unconcerned. The Doctor was bouncing along, hands

clasped behind his back, with childlike curiosity. C'rizz plodded on, seemingly

unaware that his Eutermesan physiology was bleaching the colour from his ridged

skin in a reflex effort to blend in with the gleaming white walls.

At the far end of the corridor, twin doors opened and Charley's unease grew as

a cloud of blue mist rolled out Three spacesuited figures emerged, marching

along the corridor towards them, faces hidden from view behind darkened visors.

As the spacesuits approached the group, Zalaron shepherded the Doctor's party

back against the wall with his long undulating arms to allow them to pass.

As they drew level, Charley suddenly felt quite sick, holding her hand to her

mouth and swallowing back the bile rising in her throat She heard C'rizz groan,

and saw him double over, clutching convulsively at his stomach with both hands.

Even the Doctor had paled, a sheen of sweat glistening on his normally dry brow.

Ì've been known to disagree with people in the past,' he told Zalaron, 'but I've

never known anyone disagree with me as much as those three.'

Tay them no heed. They are of no importance to you at this time,' advised the

director. Easier said than done, thought Charley.

The spacesuits halted at a door a short distance back along the corridor and, as

it opened and they stepped into the room beyond, the sick feeling in Charley's

stomach began to ease. Indeed, once the door slid back into place concealing

them from her sight, she felt fully recovered. She shot a puzzled look at the Doctor but he just shook his head almost imperceptibly.

Zalaron led them through the door at the end of the corridor. 'Behold, friends,'

he said, motioning inside. 'The Collective.'

It was a vast, spherical chamber — even the Doctor was visibly taken aback by its

sheer scale — almost completely filled by a broiling, amorphous globe. It left only a gap of a few metres between it and the wall. Illuminated from within by blue

light, the globe was shrouded by the fine cerulean mist that had spilled out into

the corridor.

Ìmpressive,' said the Doctor eventually.

`But what is it for?' asked C'rizz.

Zalaron was smiling. 'Why do you not step inside and find out for yourselves?'

`Do you think we should, Doctor?' said Charley. To her surprise, the clouds of

doubt lifted from the Time lord's face to be replaced by a brightening grin of

realisation.

`Yes,' he said, and he took a step forward, pressing his face and body into the

rippling surface of the Collective. The next step took a little more effort but finally, with a sucking, glooping noise, the Doctor was absorbed and vanished from view.

`Come along,' said C'rizz with a shrug. He threw himself at the blue wall,

disappearing after the Doctor and leaving Charley alone.

She looked behind her. She really was alone: there was no sign of Zalaron

Surely he couldn't have moved that quickly? Somehow the idea of the alien

scientist rushing anywhere seemed wholly at odds with his natural elegance.

Òh, well, Charlotte Pollard, you wanted adventure.' And with an adrenalin-

fuelled yell, she ran, launching herself at the Collective.

Charley lifted her hands to either side of her spacesuit's helmet, twisted it to

release the seals, and lifted it from her head.

`Welcome back, my friends.'

`Thank you, Zalaron,' the Doctor said with a smile. He and C'rizz had also

removed their helmets. Charley looked around the room. Computer screens

displayed ever-changing calculations, lights flickered across control panels. The

room was dominated by a circular bank of controls above which revolved an

amulet-shaped device. The wall immediately opposite the door was one huge

panoramic window affording a breathtaking view of the nearest galaxy.

`But we just passed him in the corridor,' said C'rizz, pointing at Zalaron.

`With us,' said Charley. 'Our other selves, I mean. Our earlier selves.'

`That's right,' said the Doctor. Ì'd forgotten it was as close as that. No wonder

we felt ill: we were lucky we didn't short out the Blinovitch differential. Thanks

again, Zalaron, old chap.'

`Your gratitude is unnecessary, Doctor. Was your strategy a success?'

Ìt certainly was,' the Doctor assured him, striding across to the central console

and setting down his helmet. 'In so far as it went.'

`We sprang the Doctor's trap,' Charley told the director proudly.

`By taking over the bodies of those security guards,' continued C'rizz. 'I still

have the headache.'

Òh, C'rizz, stop moaning,' said Charley. 'It's only a hangover. You'll feel better

after bacon and eggs in the TARDIS.'

`No time for that,' said the Doctor, studying readings on the various computer

screens. 'We've got less than an hour to resolve all this satisfactorily. Shall we say by midnight Galactic Meridian Time? Just to make things interesting,' he added

with a hopeful grin.

`You said this would be the most dangerous part of the plan,' Charley reminded

him.

`Yes,' confirmed C'rizz. 'What did you mean by that, Doctor?'

The Doctor looked slightly embarrassed. 'Well,' he said hesitantly. 'I intend to

create a closed temporal loop. If it works, it will tie things up nicely.'

Ànd if it doesn't?' asked Charley.

'If it doesn't... it will probably devastate the whole of creation,' admitted the

Doctor, concentrating on the console in front of him. 'Put simply, we have to do

what we've just done with the security guards — only this time, we're going to

become ourselves. Our earlier selves.'

Charley and C'rizz looked at each other.

Ìt's perfectly simple,' the Doctor said. 'We have to make sure we do what we

did.'

`But, Doctor,' said Charley, sighing. 'You're suggesting that we "submerge"

ourselves... in ourselves? But, we'll go round and round in circles. Every time we

reach this point, we'll go back again! Perhaps we already have!'

`please do not concern yourselves unduly,' cut in Zalaron, his large brown eyes

reassuring. 'That's where *these* come in.' He waved his fingers over a control and a panel in the wall opened, revealing three cubicles. As Charley removed the rest of

her spacesuit, Zalaron checked the settings on the central console.

'As you requested, Doctor, I have linked these booths to the Collective

and the

time-space navigation unit.'

`Well done, Zalaron,' said the Doctor, hurrying over and standing in one of the

cubicles. 'Come on, you two,' he urged, practically hopping with impatience.

'All right, Doctor,' said C'rizz. He and Charley took their places in the other

cubicles. 'Don't get excited.'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow. 'We're ready, Zalaron.'

Charley saw the director's fingers dance across the console and then the panel

on her cubicle slide into place, sealing her inside the booth

'Breathe normally, Charley. Try not to panic.' The Doctor's voice echoed around

Charley's head as she tried to get used to being inside the Collective. It was, she decided, exactly how it must feel to be suspended in treacle — except this was

neither sticky nor suffocating. In fact, as she followed the Doctor's advice and

relaxed in her new environment, she found herself surrounded by a cosy, warm,

blue glow.

'Quite pleasant, isn't it?' echoed the Doctor. Charley could see him now, floating

just above her with C'rizz.

'like a nice warm bath.' She giggled, the sound bouncing all around them.

'What is it for?' asked C'rizz.

'We're about to find out,' said the Doctor. He pointed to a ball of light moving

towards them, glittering like a star in the night sky, sparks of energy spitting from its surface. Once it had reached them, it started bobbing around in eccentric

circles like a will-o'-the-wisp.

'Hello,' said the Doctor. 'Who might you be?'

Charley thought he was being a bit optimistic addressing the energy ball as if it

were a real person. She was surprised, therefore, when it replied in a deep,

melodious voice.

`Hello,' it said. 'My name is Quyai.' Charley seemed to hear the voice deep

within her mind.

Ìt's very nice to meet you, Quyai. I'm the Doctor and these are my friends,

Charley and C'rizz.'

Quyai bobbed slightly in their direction in what Charley took to be a form of

greeting.

`Quyai is a Throll,' explained the Doctor. 'A being of pure thought. A bit like the energy that you two have zapping around in your brains. They exist in dreams,

thrive on telepathic communication.'

Ì am here to show you around the Collective,' said Quyai.

`Well, perhaps you could begin by explaining what the Collective is,' said C'rizz.

Òf course, C'rizz,' boomed Quyai, obviously relishing the challenge of

pronouncing a new and unfamiliar name. The Collective is a group mind

comprised of the finest thinkers in creation.'

Suddenly, Charley could see a multitude of beings suspended within the

Collective — all shapes and sizes, there seemed to be representatives from every

civilisation the universe had to offer. Each appeared to be in a serene state of

trance and, as Charley looked on, individual bodies faded away whilst others

appeared to take their places.

`Quite an achievement, Quyai,' congratulated the Doctor. 'They've all come here

to be part of the Collective?'

Ìndeed. They have formed an intellect that is able, thanks to the not

inconsiderable talents of my own race, to reach across all of known space. We can

inhabit any body on any world, learn from its knowledge and experiences and

foster universal understanding.'

`The ultimate library,' said C'rizz.

`Crudely put,' stated Quyai, 'but a reasonable analogy. It was hoped that the

Collective would be able to extend its reach across time as well as space —'

`But there's been a slight hitch,' interrupted the Doctor without warning. 'I've

just remembered why we're here.'

Darrakhaan had found the room he needed. As he blasted the door open, blue mist

poured out through the rubble and metal fragments. The tall, elegant scientist

inside had not even flinched as the door behind him had exploded inward

showering the floor with shrapnel. Darrakhaan saw immediately what he was

looking for: suspended above the control panels was the amulet he'd *seen* in his vision.

`You will explain the function of that temporal apparatus,' Darrakhaan barked

wheezily.

The scientist shrugged. 'But of course. This is merely a prototype.'

Òf what?' hissed Darrakhaan, his weapon trained unwaveringly upon the

scientist.

À time-space navigation unit,' he said simply.

Darrakhaan took a deep breath. He was right. His honour with the family would

soon be restored. 'How does it work?'

Ìt extrapolates.'

`More,' urged Darrakhaan.

`The reading of future events is not particularly troublesome,' said the scientist.

Ìf the program is sophisticated enough, the patterns of cause and effect can easily be mapped. The programs we have created for the

temporal navigator are so

advanced that once its operator has bonded with it, it will appear as if they can

"magically" foretell the future. Of course, it is not magic but science. For example, if I drop an object, we can foresee that it will land on the floor. The navigator

simply foresees more — and more sophisticated — effects and so allows its operator

to navigate his way through time. It extrapolates a thread of cause and effect, thus identifying the temporal destination.'

Darrakhaan smiled evilly and then, without warning, shot out a hand snatching

the amulet from where it hung suspended in the air. He swiftly slipped the chain

over his neck and felt the warmth of the device as it settled on his chest.

`The unit has predicted that its theft would result in the unravelling of the causal nexus,' warned the scientist 'The whole of creation will be destroyed.'

Ì am surprised,' said Darrakhaan, `that this unit failed to predict your own

death.' He raised his gun and blasted at point-blank range.

As the body slumped to the floor, Darrakhaan caressed the softly glowing

amulet, staring out of the window at the distant galaxies. His mouth dropped

open as he noticed his spaceship, still docked where he'd left it. The cloaking

device had deactivated. He knew exactly what was going to happen even before the

engines overloaded and an explosion consumed the ship in an instant. The drones

had deliberately destroyed his ship in order to prevent him escaping with the time-

space navigation unit.

Cursing, he began to formulate a new plan.

`He is coming,' announced Quyai. 'And he has shot Director Zalaron.' An image

formed in the air between the Doctor, Charley and C'rizz. It showed a figure

leaving Zalaron's dead body in a laboratory and striding along the corridor

towards the Collective chamber.

`Doctor?' asked C'rizz. 'What's going on?'

`The Sanmarus Institute,' he said, 'not to mention the entire universe past,

present and future, is under threat from a Degan criminal by the name of

Darrakhaan.'

C'rizz's frown deepened into the expression Charley had come to recognise as

the Eutermesan equivalent of thoughtful understanding. 'And we came here to

stop him?'

`Yes.' The Doctor smiled.

`Why?' said Charley. `How did we know to?'

`Because we told ourselves!' The Doctor suddenly looked perplexed. `Don't you

sense it too? No, perhaps you don't I am a Time lord, after all — asking the pair of you to perceive what's going on is a bit like asking an ant to read a road sign.'

'OW said Charley.

Àll we have to do now,' he continued, 'is deal with Darrakhaan, let our earlier

selves know what to do and extricate ourselves from our own temporal trap

without shattering the web of time.'

Èasy then,' said C'rizz.

`What's that around his neck?' asked Charley, looking at Darrakhaan in the

image before them.

Ìt's the time-space navigation unit,' the Doctor told her.

'He has already bonded with it,' explained Quyai. 'He knows he can use the

Collective to escape.'

Ànd I know how to stop him,' said the Doctor. 'But I'm stunned that I came up

with such a dangerous plan.'

In the image, Charley saw Darrakhaan enter the chamber that housed the

Collective and hurl himself towards it.

'Welcome to the Collective, Darrakhaan.'

The Degan looked around the blue sphere trying to locate the source of the

voice. His eyes eventually settled upon the glowing orange ball that was floating in the air not five metres away.

'I am Quyai,' said the ball. 'I am here to help you.'

Darrakhaan gave a short laugh. 'I don't need your help. I have foreseen

my

escape using this Collective of yours.'

'The Collective can project you anywhere in space,' confirmed Quyai.

'And this device,' said Darrakhaan, touching the time-space navigator, 'will

allow me to travel anywhere in time.'

'You wish to leave now?' asked Quyai.

'What will happen to my body?' asked Darrakhaan. 'I assume that only my mind

will be projected. My essence. What if my body is captured whilst I am gone?'

'This is not the case,' Quyai assured him. 'Your physical form will be projected

into the chosen host. The bodies will amalgamate to create a gestalt entity. The

Collective member then experiences life as the host, only becoming self-aware

when exerting extreme will power.'

'Excellent. My will is strong enough to ensure my freedom. I am ready.'

He closed his eyes.

'Not so fast, Darrakhaan,' said a commanding voice. His eyes snapped open.

Standing before him were three people. The first, the one who had spoken, was

dressed in a long, green coat. To his side were a young human female, and an alien

with ridged leathery skin constantly shifting colour as if in imitation of the

Collective around him.

'Who are you?' asked Darrakhaan.

'I am the Doctor,' said the first man, smiling. 'I and my companions, Charley

and C'rizz, are here to stop you.'

'A challenge?' asked Darrakhaan.

'A certainty,' replied the Doctor.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. The young female leaped towards

Darrakhaan and the Degan swung his pistol round, pressing the firing stud.

Nothing happened and the female dived aside, out of Darrakhaan's reach.

`Weapons do not function within the Collective,' Quyai informed him.

The woman's attack was simply a feint to give the alien the chance to lunge at

him. Before Darrakhaan could protect himself, the alien had snatched the time-

space navigation unit and, passing gracefully above, pulled the chain over

Darrakhaan's head. Floating to a halt, the creature threw the amulet in a long arc straight into the waiting hands of the Doctor.

Òwzatr he cried triumphantly.

With a roar of anger, Darrakhaan threw himself at the Doctor. The Doctor didn't **move; he just stood there, dangling the temporal navigator by its chain. Just as Darrakhaan barrelled into him, the Doctor jerked the amulet out of his reach.**

Their bodies collided...

Darrakhaan was aware from the shifting rainbow colours around him that he and

the Doctor were somewhere else but he was only concerned with seizing the

temporal navigator. He grasped the Doctor's throat with his claws.

`Give me the navigator, human,' he screamed.

The Doctor moved his head, stretching his neck and trying to ease the pressure

on his windpipe long enough for him to speak. 'I'm not human,' he croaked. 'I'm

a Time lord, and I can't let you go messing about with time. I have to stop you. It's in my job description.'

Darrakhaan's fingers prised the amulet from the Doctor's hand. Triumphantly

holding it aloft, the Began pushed the Doctor away from him. No one can stop

me,' he cried. 'I have won!'

`You have lost,' announced the Doctor, his eyes glowing with an unnatural green

light. 'From your point of view, we've been here for a few moments, but I used the navigator to create this little bit of timelessness. I arrived here hours before you.'

Darrakhaan stared at the Doctor. 'You lie,' he said.

The Doctor shook his head slowly. 'I told you, I'm a Time Lord and I gave myself plenty of time to bond with the navigator. I've plotted your course for you,

Darrakhaan. First stop is Earth where I've arranged for you to bond with a local burglar. You will break into an office block to steal the navigator, which you will believe I captured from you and hid in a safe place. This will help to convince you of your own superiority and reinforce the illusion that you have actually escaped.'

Darrakhaan glared at the Doctor in mute fury. The Doctor's smile just got

bigger.

`From there, I have arranged a little round trip for you. You will arrive in the most mundane lives I could find: a tramp looting a greenhouse, a teenager

loitering outside a police station, a Verulan, a duck in a park, a fan of rock star Diamond Sharp. My favourite is a market-stall holder on an Earth colony in the far future. You only just manage to leave him before he gets his brains blown out. And all the time you will be within easy reach of me, or one of my past selves. You see, I can always step into one of my own bodies to thwart you should any of your little schemes get too ambitious.'

Ànd what is the point of all this?' asked Darrakhaan.

`To keep you on the move whilst lulling you into a false sense of security,' the 241

Doctor told him. `So that you have no worries about making your final journey.'

The Doctor paused. 'You see, I've fixed it so that you will travel back in time to

occupy your own body just after you break into the Sanmarus Institute.'

`No...' Darrakhaan could already feel a gentle pull at his body as he began to

fade from existence. His journey was about to begin and he knew the Doctor was

right. That was why he collapsed just after his arrival on the station. That was how he knew exactly what was going to happen to him. It was nothing to do with the

temporal research at Sanmarus. He knew what was about to happen because he

had been through it an infinite number of times before.

`Sorry, Darrakhaan,' said the Doctor sadly. 'I've trapped you forever in

a time

loop. I'll say goodbye.' He smiled. 'But we'll meet again... And again... And

again... And again...'

The Doctor's voice grew fainter as Darrakhaan felt everything fade away....

Anthony James Dunn awoke from a troubled dream in which he was running

through treacle, pursued by an unknown terror. He hadn't been able to see what

was behind him but knew for certain that someone or something was chasing him

and, no matter how fast he tried to run, he couldn't get away.

He hauled himself up off the sofa, scattering empty beer cans as he went, and

groped for the TV remote control to turn off the late-night news.

looking in his mirror, he rubbed his bloodshot eyes, wondering what he had

drunk to make them glow green like that. As the strange tint faded away, he picked

his broken nose. Who cared what his ex-wives thought; he still had it.

He'd have to go in a minute. If all went well, he would be able to leave this

miserable existence far behind. His burglary of MacDonald, O'Brien and Withers

(Solicitors) would set him up for life. He bent down to peer at the goldfish bowl

on his living room table. He imitated the gasping movements of the fish's mouth,

thinking how sad it must be to spend your whole life just going round

and round

in circles.

With a sudden flare of multicoloured light, the Doctor reappeared in the

Collective. He performed a bow as if expecting a round of applause from his

audience. He looked quite crestfallen when he received none.

`Where's Darrakhaan?' asked Charley.

Òn his way to Earth,' replied the Doctor. 'Quyai, I shall need your help.'

Òf course,' agreed Quyai bobbing nearer. 'What do you require me to do?'

Ì need your expertise to transmit me into the body of a security guard working

in the offices of MacDonald, O'Brien and Withers on twenty-first-century Earth.'

`The solicitors' office in the newspaper report?' asked C'rizz. 'We're going to

solve the mystery?'

`More likely to cause it,' said the Doctor. 'And you can forget this "we" business.

I'm going alone.'

Ànd why, exactly, is that, Doctor?' demanded Charley, hands on her hips and

one eyebrow raised.

`Because it's going to be a very dangerous journey,' said the Doctor. 'It will

involve inhabiting someone else's body and completely submerging

my own

personality so that Darrakhaan doesn't guess what's going on until it's too late.'

Ìt seems an awful lot of trouble to go to,' said Charley.

Ìt is,' confirmed the Doctor. 'But I need to know that my plan has worked and

that Darrakhaan is trapped and can't cause too much trouble. The easiest way to

do that is to actually be there.'

`Come on, Doctor,' said Charley. 'You'll need our help.'

The Doctor looked at her. 'Charley, I would have thought that after your last

experience of "submerging your personality" —'

`last time wasn't my idea,' she reminded him. 'This is totally different to

Armstrong's Colony.'

The Doctor's eyes flicked between his two friends. He gave a resigned shrug and

sighed, 'Oh, what's the point of arguing?'

`When do we leave?' asked Charley with a grin.

`There's no time like the present,' said the Doctor. 'Quyai?'

Ì have monitored all that has been happening, Doctor,' the Throll told him,

ànd I am aware that Darrakhaan used the time-space navigation unit to escape.

How, then, can you hope to follow him?'

The Doctor held up his right hand to reveal the amulet swinging on its chain.

`Don't forget, Quyai, I reprogrammed the navigator. It took Darrakhaan to Earth

and then came straight back to me.'

`That is very clever, Doctor.'

'I know,' said the Doctor, smugly. 'Now, these are the space-time coordinates.'

He closed his eyes, sending the information to Quyai telepathically.

`Thank you, Doctor,' said the Throll at length. 'I am ready. Prepare yourselves.

The sensation will be... interesting.'

The Doctor waved cheerily as he and his companions faded away.

`*We have* an intruder on the fourth floor...'

feel like a woman trapped *in a man's body.'*

Charlotte is who *I am!* Charley Pollard...

Darrakhaan *escaped...'*

We are returning to *the Collective, saying goodbye* to Quyai and *climbing into spacesuits...*

Walking past ourselves and feeling ill...

Zalaron is transmitting us into our *own* bodies at *an earlier* point in time, *in the* TARDIS...

The Doctor is smiling *as he sets the coordinates for the Sanmarus* Institute...

'Time to *wake* up, Charley...'

`Time to wake up, Charley.'

Charley opened her eyes to find herself standing in the cubicle in the temporal

research chamber. The false wall had been slid aside and she could see Director

Zalaron helping C'rizz over to a comfortable-looking chair.

`Did we escape from the time loop?' Charley asked groggily.

Òf course we did,' the Doctor told her, lowering her into a second chair before

perching himself on the edge of a control console.

`How?' asked C'rizz.

Ìf I understand things correctly,' came Zalaron's sing-song voice, the Doctor

created a self-limiting time loop. You all *went* back in time to ensure that you came here in the first place with the small amount of foreknowledge required to deal

with Darrakhaan.'

C'rizz was looking confused.

The chronic energy that hit us in the TARDIS,' the Doctor said, smiling. 'That

was us!'

`So how did we escape?' asked Charley.

`We doubled back on ourselves,' explained the Doctor. 'I plotted a course for us

back to our own time streams after all the events we were involved in here at the

Institute had taken place.'

`But the time loop? Why haven't we just gone round and round?'

Ìn a way, we have. Our earlier selves... the ones we passed in the corridor...

they'll go back. But we won't'

Ìs that possible?' Charley asked him, a worried frown creasing her

brow.

Ìt is for a Time Lord.' The Doctor smiled. 'And his friends. And poor old

Darrakhaan stays caught in the loop, his round trip bringing him back here to

start his journey through space and time again and again.'

Òne other thing,' said Charley. 'Why aren't you dead, Director? I mean, I'm

rather glad you're not, but I thought Darrakhaan shot you.'

`He did,' confirmed Zalaron `Darrakhaan told me he was surprised that the

time-space navigation unit failed to predict my death. Well, of course, it did. When he shot me, I was wearing a personal force shield which dissipated the energy

blast I was stunned but otherwise unharmed. My one great regret is that the

navigator is lost'

Ìt'll stay forever in the time loop,' explained the Doctor. 'Much safer that way.'

There was a sudden insistent bleeping from the central console and the Doctor

leaped up from where he was sitting. Moving across to the console, he studied the

readings for a moment before straightening up, pushing his hands deep into his

pockets and smiling at his friends.

`Time to go,' he announced. 'We finished with time to spare. That was midnight

Galactic Meridian Time.'

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